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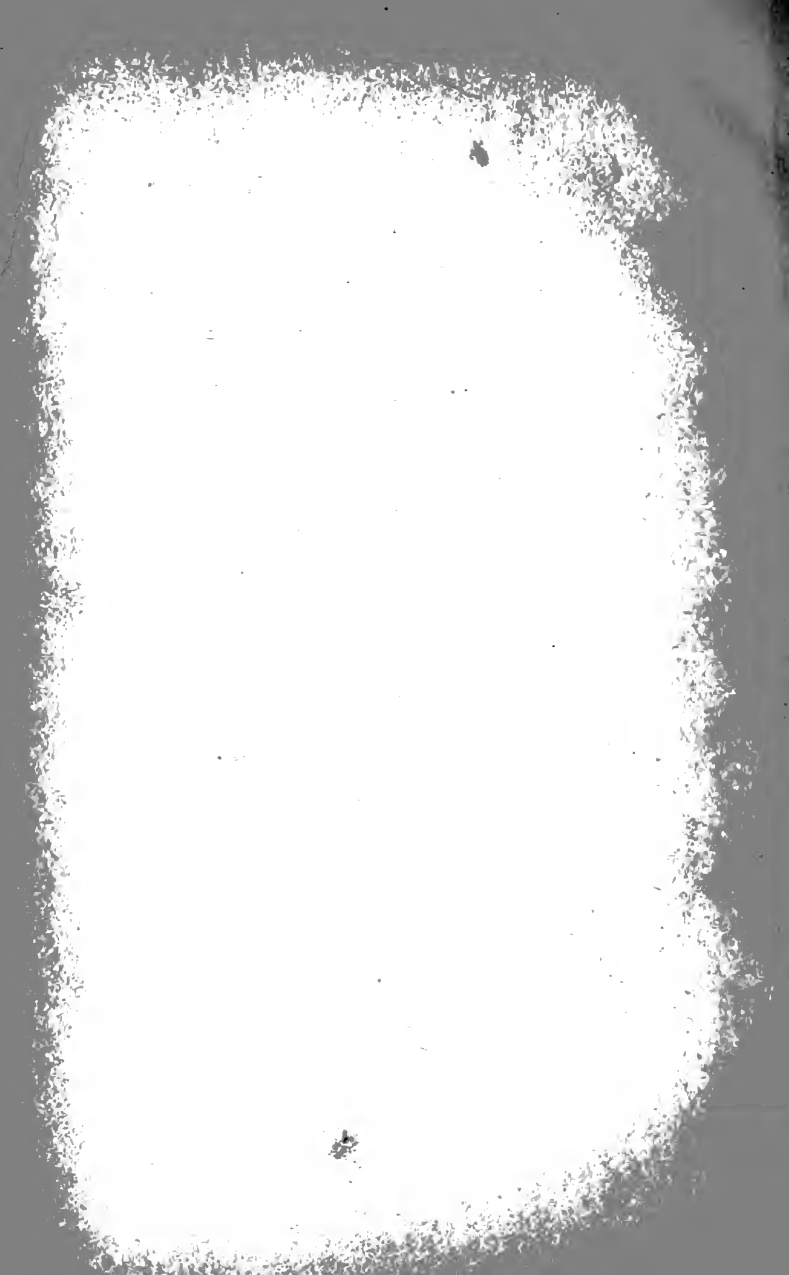
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JUDITH WYNNE,

A Novel.

BY

C. L. PIRKIS,

AUTHOR OF "DI FAWCETT," "A VERY OPAL," &c., &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:

F. V. WHITE & CO., 31, SOUTHAMPTON ST., STRAND, W.C.

1884.

PRINTED BY
KELLY & CO., GATE STREET, LINCOLN'S INN FIELDS, W.C. ;
AND KINGSTON-ON-THAMES.

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TWO MEN AND A MAID.

JUDITH WYNNE.



VOLUME I.

CHAPTER I.

IT lay in a deep, shadowy hollow, a forlorn, God-forgotten house to look at. Like the Grange of poetic legend, it was surrounded by a moat, but it could not be said of it, as of the ill-fated Mariana's abode, that around "for leagues no tree did mark the waste," for it was backed by a dark, thick wood of most ancient growth. Plas-y-coed the old house was called by the people in the district; The Grange was the name by which it was as a rule distinguished by the Reeces, in whose family, with its acres of park and arable land, it had been for genera-

tions, passing in steady, unbroken line from heirs male to heirs male.

Beyond the background of dark wood rose the blue mountains of Llanniswth, peak over peak in all their sharp, lonely grandeur. Down their rough, cleft sides rushed ceaselessly the cataracts, which fertilised the deep-growing trees of the ancient wood. The air was always humid, a grey mist seemed ever hanging about. The lichen on the old walls, the marish mosses which fringed the paths, had reached an almost tropical luxuriance ; the stone-paved terrace was absolutely slippery with the minute vegetation which grew in every crevice between the flags.

“I say, old fellow,” cried Oscar Reece, coming down the five steps which led from the house with a spring and a bound, “you should turn in an army of gardeners here ; our lives are not safe, a coroner’s inquest will be the end of it—that’s a fact.”

Wolfgang Reece, standing on the terrace with a sealed letter in his hand, paid

no heed to the speaker. He was elder brother by about a dozen years to Oscar, and is the present master of The Grange.

"Where is my mother?" he asked, and getting Oscar's reply, "In the breakfast-room," he opened a little door leading off the terrace and went into the house.

Within, the house was as desolate as it was without. It abounded in long, winding passages, and small, low-ceiled rooms. The breakfast-room, with the morning sun upon it, was possibly the cheeriest and best lighted of these. When Wolfgang turned the handle and went in, it seemed full of the chequered sunlight which fell through the beech-trees growing close—too close for health one would think—to the casemented window. An elderly lady was seated in a huge arm-chair with knitting-needles in her hand; a big, brown mastiff lay at her feet, and formed her footstool. Her head was large and well-set, her features good, but too massive to suit conventional ideas of female

beauty. Her hair was white as snow, her complexion clear and pale. The least exact of observers might have identified these two as mother and son. Wolfgang had the same large, well-set head, and regular, massive features. Her hair must have been fair as his in her early youth, her eyes possibly as deep a grey, and as clear and bright as his, though now, alas! dim and glazed with premature disease which was slowly but surely ending in total blindness.

When they spoke their voices had the same clear, strong vibration.

"Here is a letter, mother," he said, "with an Indian stamp on it. Shall I read it to you?"

"An Indian stamp!" she repeated. "I only know of one person in India likely to write to me—Colonel Wynne, my mother's third cousin. But it's seven or eight years at least since we last corresponded. Yes, read it, Wolf."

It was from Colonel Wynne. The first

page of the letter was given up to congratulations.

“I heard quite by chance,” he wrote, “of Wolf coming into the Welsh property. From the bottom of my heart I congratulate you all. It was an odd thing poor Bernard Reece dying so suddenly. Only twenty-seven, wasn’t he? That trip to Bermuda was a wild thing for a man to undertake without any rhyme or reason. However, it has brought good fortune to you and yours, so we won’t moan over it. Now I am writing to ask a special favour of you, Elizabeth. Will you take my little girl, Judith, under your wing, for the next two years? As you know, she has been brought up in France with her mother’s people. When my Mélanie died, Judith went to live with her aunt and uncle at St. André. That was ten years ago, and I have not seen her since. Well, the aunt was a strict Presbyterian, the uncle a Catholic priest, an odd commingling of influence to place a child under, was it not? All I

begged of them was not to interfere with her religious opinions. I don't think they have, for she writes to me that she has never failed in her attendance at a Protestant place of worship. The aunt has just died, and as I do not like the idea of her staying on with the priest, I shall be very grateful to you if you will take her into your home, give her an insight, as it were, into an English household, till I can return to England and make one for her. In two years' time I hope to be able to do this, but not before. I know of no one in England but yourself of whom I could ask this favour."

Oscar had come into the room during the reading of this letter. He now burst forth exuberantly:

"A girl coming to stay with us? How awfully jolly! Mother, of course you'll say yes. It would be downright cruel to refuse to take her in. I hope she'll be a good specimen. Of course, Wolf, you'll have the old place made habitable now?"

Mrs. Reece laid down her knitting.

"Let me see, Oscar," she said meditatively: "Judith Wynne is just nineteen, you are just twenty. Ah, you will be safe enough. Nothing under five-and-twenty would suit you at the present moment. Wolf is in the greater danger, he is turned thirty-one, but still thirty-one is an age at which a man ought to be able to take care of himself."

"Yes, if he is ever going to," said Wolf, laying down the letter and walking towards the door.

"I say," shouted Oscar after him, "you'll see about the repairs at once, won't you?"

But to this Wolf made no reply.



CHAPTER II.

FROM whatever cause it might arise, the fact remained that no sound of workman's hammer nor gardener's hoe broke the silence which, like the mountain mist, seemed perpetually to overhang the old Grange.

Judith Wynne, as she drove up the weedy road leading to the old house, thought in all her life she had never set eyes upon a more hopelessly desolate and forlorn-looking habitation.

The neat, pretty French home she had just quitted was still photographed vividly on her brain. She shut her eyes, and once more it rose up before her as on the morning when she had looked her last

good-bye to it—a square, white-fronted villa, in the streaming June sunlight, long-windowed, with pretty green veranda which ran the length of its frontage, and was broken here and there by the big orange-trees in tubs, and pink-flowered oleanders. A house, in fact, giving every outward sign of neat housewifery and careful keeping. She opened her eyes, and, lo! there stood before her a long, low, damp-looking building, grey with the lichen that hung about its eaves, green in patches with the smaller-growing mosses, its wood-work bronzed and blistered, its windows uncurtained, its frontage unswept. The contrast between the two homes—the one which her memory held and the one which faced her—was keen. It set her shuddering, and it set her thinking.

Wolf and Oscar had met her at Pen-Cwellyn, the little station seven miles from The Grange, and had driven her home.

It was a long drive. The June sun was at its highest, and Wolf had apologised for the open carriage he had brought for her.

“We have no other,” he had said simply. Oscar’s fair, boyish face had flushed crimson as he spoke.

Judith, looking from one to the other, thought she had never seen two brothers more unlike in form and feature.

“He will be handsome in ten years’ time,” she had said to herself, taking stock of Oscar’s bronzed hair, blue eyes, and fine, though slight figure. “And he will be an old man in ten years’ time,” she had thought as her eye rested on Wolf’s stooping shoulders, the grey that showed here and there on his brown hair and beard, the deep, knotted frown which drew his brows together and made his dark eyes seem sunken and dim.

Oscar kept cheerful talk going as they drove along the flinty road. It necessarily had to be talk on general topics, for they were strangers, one to the other,

in all but name. Judith knew but little of these distant cousins of hers. She had heard some seven or eight years previously of the death of their father, a hard-working East of London clergyman, who had taken typhus-fever from one of his poor parishioners, and had died at his post. She had heard that his mantle had fallen on his son Wolfgang, and that he had worked as hard as a curate as his father had as a rector. Whispers had also reached her, though she scarcely knew how true they were, of hardship and poverty which the widow had been called upon to endure; of the death by fever of all her children, save the eldest and youngest; of the gradual, though certain loss of her own eyesight. All this Judith had heard in a far-off roundabout sort of way from time to time, and she had listened to it much as she would have listened to anyone telling her of changes in the government of Australia or Japan, a sort of something altogether

outside her little circle of living interests. Then, quite unexpectedly, there had come to her news in a more direct fashion from her father, telling her of the change in the fortunes of these people, of their sudden accession to comparative wealth and importance through the death of Bernard Reece. With this news Colonel Wynne had coupled the wish that, for a time at any rate, Judith should make her home with these distant relatives.

It seemed odd to the girl to have her life thus suddenly linked to the family life of these strangers. She could scarcely realise the fact, even as she drove along the lonely Welsh road with the two brothers. It seemed to her almost incredible that her bright, beautiful, tranquil French life was altogether a thing of the past, that for the next two years at any rate her days were to be passed among people of whom she knew little more than the names.

Mrs. Reece gave the young girl a kindly greeting.

"I wish I could see your face, my dear," she said, "that I might see whether there is anything of your father in you."

She had not learnt that quick, light touch which comes naturally to the born-blind, and which conveys to them likeness of feature as well as knowledge of colour. Poor soul! her blindness had struck her too late in life for that. She was obliged to trust to one or other of her sons for her impressions of the outer world.

Later on in the day, when Judith had gone to her room to rest, tired out with her long journey, Mrs. Reece, hearing Oscar over his fishing-tackle, asked him to come and tell her what the new comer was like, and what he thought of her. Oscar gave a low whistle.

"Oh, well, she's—she's just so—nothing more. That's what I think of her."

"Unintelligible, as usual, Oscar," said

his mother ; “ try to put your meaning into plain English, for my special benefit.”

“ ’Pon my life I can’t, mother. She’s just so—nothing more. I can’t say she is what she isn’t.”

“ But you can tell me whether she is tall or short, ugly or pretty, fair or dark, I suppose.”

“ No ; I don’t think she’s anything of all that ; she’s what I said, ‘ just so,’ and nothing will make anything else of her.”

“ So ! ”—Mrs. Reece had passed her early days in Germany, and had brought back with her a fondness for this monosyllable together with a love for knitting-pins. “ Is Wolf there ? Ask him to come to me.”

And Wolf coming had the questions repeated to him. What was Judith like, and what did he think of her ?

He answered slowly and thoughtfully :

“ She is small, and slight, with dark hair, pale face, and very dark eyes. She

speaks little, but I should imagine thinks a great deal. I should say she was fond of poetry and that sort of thing, not of the realities of life."

"Stop—stop, Wolf; that will do. I didn't ask for a rhapsody. Ah, I can see which of you two boys will want keeping out of harm's way."

If she could have seen the sudden dark cloud that swept over Wolf's face, she would not have hazarded her light words.

Oscar saw it and sought to effect a diversion.

"Why, mother!" he cried, "after seven years of a curate's life, with all the women in the parish shooting at him, do you think Wolf will fall a victim to the first little dark girl who comes into the house?"

The old lady shook her head wisely.

"Ah," she answered, "Cupid takes some with darts, and some with traps. Look to yourself, Wolf, that's all."

CHAPTER III.

NEXT to the keen eye which pierces straight to the heart of things, the clear eye for an outline is perhaps one of the most blessed gifts a man or woman can be dowered with. It keeps the senses unmystified by the small, pressing, multitudinous details of everyday life, the brain free to take in "the situation" whatever it may be, the hand ready and strong for action.

Judith had possessed this clear, true eye for an outline in a remarkable degree from childhood upwards. Wolf, describing her to his mother, had credited her with a poetic temperament; nevertheless, others seeing her from their point of view,

had been wont to speak of her as a remarkably practical, matter-of-fact person. Both descriptions were true; the two temperaments are not irreconcilable, whatever some superficial thinkers may say.

Be this as it may, Judith had not been a week in the old Grange before she said to herself as she noted Wolf's gloomy, abstracted ways, the manifest yet unsuccessful efforts he made to be one with the rest of the household: "That man has suffered." Before the end of a second week she had appended a rider to her verdict, which ran thus: "He is suffering now." At the close of three weeks another rider was added to this effect: "And he has a secret locked up in his heart."

With Oscar she speedily became on very good terms. They called each other by their Christian names before the first fortnight was over their heads. Their dispositions, though diverse, harmonised admirably. Oscar was a good talker,

Judith a first-rate listener. Oscar loved a free, outdoor life for the sake of sport and plentiful bodily exercise, and Judith loved the fields, the mountains, the woods, because she had an eye for a landscape, and a heart that beat in sympathetic response to every glad sound of bird, beast, or insect.

Thus it came about that most of the bright June mornings were passed in each other's society; and when, June ended, Oscar announced the fact that he was going up to London to stay in the house of a clergyman, who was to coach him for matriculation at Oxford, Judith felt that all the sunshine was leaving Plas-y-Coed, and wondered what other companion would be given her for her morning walks and mountain scrambles.

There was no talk, however, of other companionship.

"Judith will be dull, I fear," said Wolf to his mother, a day or two after Oscar had gone.

He called her Judith behind her back; Miss Wynne always when addressing her.

He had watched the young girl go slowly along the weedy gravel path, and lean over the mossy gate as though she were looking longingly across the green fields to the dark hills beyond.

Mrs. Reece was pursuing her own train of thought.

"No one but a man or an idiot would have sent a girl of that age into a house with two grown-up sons, unless he wanted her to marry one of them," she said slowly.

Wolf started as if struck by some sudden idea.

"Judith will be very rich some day. She is an heiress, is she not?" he asked abruptly.

The mother nodded.

"Her father has coined money, I hear, since he retired from the service. Of course, as she is an only child, it must all go to her. Then, too, her mother's

money is settled on her. She was Mélanie MacIvor Dutertre, half Scotch, half French. She and her sister—Judith's aunt, lately dead—were both strict Presbyterians. The brother followed his father's faith, and became a priest. Of course his money will go to the Church, but the aunt's money has been carefully tied up for Judith when she comes of age."

"It's a thousand pities Oscar isn't ten years older," said Wolf dreamily.

The mother laughed outright.

"What, are you turning matchmaker, Wolf? You are coming out in a new character with a vengeance. She would suit you ever so much better than Oscar."

Wolf did not hear her; he had taken his hat and followed Judith down the garden-path.

She was leaning over the gate, half-thinking, half-dreaming, in that disjointed, hazy sort of way girls of nineteen are given to. Her heart at first had been full of sweet, sad memories of the dear dead aunt

as she had leaned over the gate, but one by one they had been chased away by the glad, bright realities about her—the flooding sunshine, the gloriously blue sky, the fresh greenness of field and woodland, the summer-scented breeze and soft air.

A shadow fell across her as she stood. She started, and turned to see Wolf at her elbow. She had not heard his footfall on the path. Somehow the mere approach of this grave, stern man always seemed to send a chill through her. She could never think of him as parish priest, pastor and shepherd of his flock ; she could picture him rather as one of the soldier-priests of old time, leading on his host, crozier in one hand, falchion in the other, and crying aloud in his deep, strong voice : “ Strike, and smite, and let not one of them escape ! ”

“ Let us go for a walk,” he said, opening the gate as he spoke ; “ it’s too hot for climbing, but the woods will be pleasant.”

Judith would rather he had said : “ Will you like to go for a walk ? ” His air of

command offended her. For one thing, she was not used to it—a gentle, unvarying courtesy had ever been the order of the day in her French home. However, she raised no objection, so to the woods they went.

“You miss Oscar, of course?” he said, going on before her through the rough tangle of briar and long grass so as to make her path a little clear for her.

“The dear bright boy! Yes; of course I do,” answered Judith warmly, and with a frankness that scattered the feeble hopes Wolf had conjured up to the four winds of heaven.

Nevertheless he persevered.

“Is he such a boy?” he questioned. “He’s nearly twenty. I was a man—I had to be a man when I was but little older than he.”

“Ah, you might be a man at twenty, I doubt very much if Oscar will be one much before he’s thirty!”

“Yes, circumstances count for some-

thing," he said in a tone that had a touch of bitterness in it.

Then for five minutes they walked on together in silence.

It might be he was thinking of the hard times he had lived through as curate on a hundred and fifty pounds a year, and when that sum, added to a hundred pounds annuity of his mother's, was the total from which their household wants had had to be supplied.

Judith guessed whither his thoughts were tending. Oscar had been very confidential with her as to the past experiences of his family in the East of London. She hastened to change the subject.

"Oscar will feel strange shut up in London after the open-air life he has led here! Is he a good student?" she asked. She knew in her own heart that the answer must be in the negative, if Wolf answered truly.

"Oscar is not a good student," he said. "But, Miss Wynne, do you think that

matters? Do you think a man is any the worse for loving nature better than books? A man's mind we all know can be, and often is, marred by books rather than made by them. Now nothing would make a student of Oscar."

"No," interrupted Judith laughingly; "nothing would make a student of Oscar."

"But," pursued Wolf eagerly, wistfully almost, it seemed to Judith, "I'll undertake to say, in five or six years' time, no one will beat Oscar in honour, in integrity——"

"Or in jumping a five-barred gate, or in fly-fishing, or fox-hunting!" again interrupted Judith.

"In all that goes to make an all-round good man; but—but I want him to be more than this—something over and above all this——"

Judith here came to a standstill in the narrow path they were following. Her dress had caught in the thorns of a low-growing bramble-bush.

Wolf paused in his talk, but stood watching her disengage the hem of her dress without offering assistance.

How surprisingly little there seemed of the Frenchwoman in this young girl, naught, indeed, if one excepted the extreme neatness and daintiness of her personal appearance. What an odd, frank way she had of speaking, as though necessity were laid upon her to speak always the exact truth. Yet she was not fond of talking, never opened her lips, in fact, unless specially addressed. She must have read much, thought more, possibly.

All this passed through Wolf's mind as he stood silently surveying her.

The dress disentangled, Judith went on her way again in silence. Wolf took up his theme once more, but found the difficulties of expression growing upon him.

"As I was saying," he began, "I want him to be something more than all this. Can you guess what I mean? I want him to be happy, contented, at peace."

Judith's dark eyes, lifted to her companion's face, expressed her amazement.

"The dear bright boy!" she cried again. "Why should he not be happy?"

"Why—why," stammered Wolf; "why is it so many of us are not happy? How is it so few of us find real, lasting peace and blessedness?"

He broke off abruptly. His words were hurrying him on, whither he knew not. But it was difficult pleading with a girl for a suitor whom she persisted in calling "a dear bright boy." Besides—and this thought pressed upon him now for the first time—even supposing Judith should be inclined to look upon Oscar as a likely suitor, it might be possible Oscar would not be willing to present himself in that guise. He must give up the idea, as of late he had given up so many other cherished notions.

His next words broke from him with something of a sigh:

"It is evident, Miss Wynne, that your

lines have been cast in pleasant places. May God keep your feet always from rough and thorny paths!"

Judith turned to face him in her astonishment. The words seemed somehow wrung from the very depths of his heart. It was as though they had been startled out of him. Yet she could not help feeling sore and a little indignant that he should thus entirely ignore the fact that her crape had not yet lost its freshness, that she had sorrowed and suffered, though she had learnt to bear her pain in silence.

"I loved Aunt Maggie passionately," she said in a low, quiet voice, "and if I had had my choice, I would have died sooner than have left Uncle Pierre alone in his sorrow."

Wolf caught her meaning in an instant.

"Forgive me," he exclaimed, taking her hand; "it must have been a terrible wrench for you to leave your old home and come among strangers. But those were outside sorrows, sorrows that came

and were not invited. What I meant was——”

Again he broke off and walked on with quick strides. He seemed to have forgotten that he still held Judith's hand, till she gently endeavoured to release it from his grasp. Then he dropped it as though it had stung him.

They had now reached the very heart of the wood. Straight across their path a brisk rivulet sparkled and rippled. It was an offshoot from one of the big cascades, whose rush and tumble of water went on from morning till night. Wolf paused, looking down into the little stream.

“‘Wash me,’” he murmured, “‘and I shall be clean.’ Once I preached a sermon on those words.” Then suddenly turning to Judith, he asked her: “Miss Wynne, do you believe in the possibility of repentance, of a man whose whole soul is steeped in sin, ever again becoming pure, white, and clean?”

And Judith, looking up in his face, answered simply :

“I believe in repentance just as I believe in the resurrection of the dead, the remaking of the soul as I believe in the remaking of the body.”

“And scientists of the present day will tell you the one thing is as impossible as the other,” he said with a short, abrupt laugh. Then he turned to her again. “Child, tell me, where did you get your faith and what is it? Is it Presbyterian or is it Catholic? Did you pick it up by the wayside, or did you hear it thundered from some pulpit by a man professing himself to be a servant of God, but who in heart was the devil’s prime minister?”

Judith had no answer ready for him. His words startled and pained her. What did he—could he mean? He, a minister of God, a man of full age, asking her, little more than a child, of her beliefs and how she got them, just as though

he were seeking wherewith to bolster up his own!

He did not seem to expect a reply. He turned his back on her and began walking rapidly forwards, following the upward course of the stream.

Judith remained standing where she was.

“He has forgotten me,” she thought; and she also thought, “so much the better. I will get back to the house alone; the walk has been long enough.”

Suddenly he paused, turned back, and with slow, irregular footsteps came towards her. His head was bowed, his face ashen-white, his brow drawn as though he were in actual bodily pain. He took both her hands in his, looking down in her face.

“ ‘And found no place for repentance,’ ” he said in hoarse, low tones, “ ‘though he sought it carefully and with tears.’ Child, how do you explain those words? Esau was made of better stuff than most of us; he sins once and finds no place

for repentance, though he seeks for it carefully—carefully, mark you—and with tears. What have you to say to that?”

He seemed to wait with breath suspended for her answer. He grasped her hands so tightly that they felt crushed, bruised. The wood seemed suddenly to have grown still. From afar came the tap-tap of a lonely woodpecker.

Her reply came clear and distinct enough after a moment's pause.

“I should say,” she answered simply, “that his tears blinded him, and prevented him finding what he sought. He should have held out his hand for someone to help him with eyes and hands.”

She spoke, well knowing what she was saying, anxious only to be of some little service to one who was so evidently sorrowing and suffering.

For a moment he stood still, looking at her, and Judith could feel that he was trembling from head to foot. His

lips parted as though about to speak, then closed resolutely. He let go her hands abruptly; his face grew hard and rigid.

“Come, let us go home,” he said in dry, short tones. “My mother will think we have lost ourselves in the wood.”

They made their way back to the house almost in perfect silence. Wolf made no further attempt at conversation, and Judith was as disinclined for it as he.



CHAPTER IV.

FOR several days after this Wolf and Judith saw but little of each other. It seemed as though by mutual consent they kept out of each other's way. A large portion of Wolf's mornings were of necessity given to an audience with old Maurice, the land-steward, who had had the management of affairs in the old squire's time, and was loth to let them slip through his fingers now. This audience took place in a study, a little den which Wolf had had temporarily fitted for his use on the ground-floor.

Here he listened patiently, or at any rate with iron endurance, to the old man's

complaints of the late squire's niggardliness in money matters, the miserly fashion in which he had kept up a house that had once been the pride of the county, the terrible outbursts that had invariably attended young Mr. Bernard's applications (numerous it must be confessed) for money. The said complaints, however, generally wound up with a brief doxology to the old master's memory (on the principle, possibly, of giving even Lucifer his due). "For all that, he was a good master to me, and I've no occasion to speak ill of him," and a brief appeal to his present master, made at first as a matter of course, but of late somewhat uncertainly and dubiously: "And I suppose, sir, you'll be setting the repairs going soon; it will take a mint of money to make things as they ought to be."

But at this point Wolf's iron endurance seemed invariably to have reached its limit, for he would rise from his chair and politely give the old man his *congé*

with a "That will do this morning, Maurice; I think we have got through enough for to-day."

An equally large portion, however, of Wolf's time seemed to be passed in the library, a dark, damp, long room, which ran the entire length of the darkest, dampest side of the house.

"Here are the products of some hundreds of dead men's brains, let us make haste to give them decent burial," seems to be the thought in some men's minds, when they construct their libraries, and hurry their volumes as fast as possible out of sight and into oblivion. Anyhow, this library was vault-like enough to have hurried men's bodies as well as their brain-products to corruption.

So at least Judith thought in the one glimpse she had of it. Now a library had ever been to her the one chamber of delights in every house she had ever visited. At Villa Rosa she and Uncle Pierre had passed the greater part of

their lives among the books. Her one idea of happiness had been to pull a score or so of volumes on to the floor, seat herself in their midst, and in succession devour or at any rate taste them. She longed to repeat the experiment here, and one day coming in hot and dusty from a long walk, and finding the door ajar, she crept in, thinking she would rest there till the luncheon-bell rang.

Shade of Magliabechi, what a room it was! Coming in from the sunlight it seemed so dark she could scarcely distinguish aught; the small-paned windows were greened with a thin veil of moss, and outside, scratching the very glass with their lusty arms, creaked and groaned cedars and yews, which had kept at least three or four hundred birthdays. Little by little, however, as her eyes grew accustomed to the dimness, she could make out her surroundings. She looked round her in vain for sofa or easy-chair. A large

round table stood in the middle of the room, at which were placed, at equal distances, four high-backed chairs, one a little withdrawn, as though some one had just risen from the table.

“That must be where Wolf was sitting,” she thought. “But what can make him choose the darkest part of the room? He could neither read nor write there without a lamp. And oh, what an odour!”

The air seemed positively heavy with damp, mildewed dust, and that peculiar “old book smell” which tells of decaying volumes.

It hung about everywhere, to the walls, to the ceiling; the very curtains, dark, thick, heavily-fringed, seemed to exhale it. And no wonder! The massive oak book-shelves were simply inch thick with dust; the volumes scattered here and there on the smaller tables, and one or two, casually left on the high carved mantelpiece, were buried under a solid, clinging, white coating.

Over this mantelpiece hung the portrait, finely painted in oils, of a man about twenty-five years of age. Judith stood for at least five minutes looking up at him. His features were well-shaped, his eyes bright and laughing. Something in the face, though it certainly was not in the expression of the eyes, brought back Wolf's to her mind.

"Was this an ancient Reece," she wondered, noting the sodden and faded appearance alike of canvas and frame, "or a modern Reece? Ten years of this dust and mildew would make any picture antique."

"That is the portrait of my cousin—fourth or fifth cousin, I should say—Bernard Reece," said a voice at her elbow, and turning, she saw Wolf had come in, and was surveying her and the picture with anything but a pleased expression of countenance.

Judith felt herself an intruder immediately, and began to make apologies.

“It was so hot outside; this room looked so dark and cool,” she said.

Wolf went on as though he had not heard her :

“He was the last owner of this place. This was the last room he sat in before he sailed for America. Do you see this round table? It was placed here on the day of his father’s funeral, when the will was read. This lamp in the centre must have been lighted then; they could not have read a lawyer’s handwriting without it. See, it has not been trimmed since. These four chairs were placed, one for the lawyer, one for the parson, one for the steward—old Maurice, you know, my present steward—and one for Bernard. This was Bernard’s chair; it is my seat now,” here he gave a short, hard laugh, “and my favourite seat, I may say. I never use any other in the room.”

It was all said in the driest and hardest of voices—the sort of voice a

man might use in reading an uninteresting parliamentary debate which had to be got through for the benefit of another; or in which a man with a broken heart would tell the story of his darling's death to an unconcerned listener.

Judith's eyes wandered from the living to the dead man's face.

"It is like you and not like you," she said. "The features are the same, but——"

"But the soul that shows through them is different," Wolf interrupted. "No two men could be more unlike than my cousin Bernard and myself."

He paused a moment, then added in slightly sarcastic tones:

"Now, Miss Wynne, that you have scanned the mysteries of the library, don't you think that the sooner you get out of this damp, mildewy air the better? Five minutes more of it will give you ague, or fever, or something equally unpleasant, I am confident."

He held open the door for her. Judith had no choice but to pass out.

Half-way down the corridor she heard the oak door shut heavily, and she fancied, too, she heard the key turned in the lock.

She felt altogether mystified and bewildered. What could he find to do in that dark, mournful room? Why did he not have it cleaned out, and made comfortable and habitable?

What, too, had been the history of this Bernard Reece? Had he belonged to that unlucky and numerous class of individuals described in common parlance as "nobody's enemy but their own," or had his brief life been lived in such sort as to bring upon him the enmity of these his only surviving relatives? Of what kind and strength had been the bond between Wolf and him? She loved old legends of any and every sort, and this one, with its train of attendant mysteries, of which now and again she

seemed to catch glimpses, she felt must be worth knowing.

Later on in the day, as she and Mrs. Reece sat alone over their knitting, she hazarded a question or two.

How old was Bernard Reece when he died? What sort of life had he led? Was that frank, handsome picture a good likeness of him?

"Ah, you mean the one in the library where Wolf writes his sermons," answered Mrs. Reece. "Yes, they tell me it is an excellent likeness. He was a handsome young fellow, no doubt; but wild and headstrong to a degree. I don't speak from personal knowledge, however, only from report. None of us ever set eyes on him."

"Not even Wolf?" questioned Judith.

"Not even Wolf, nor Wolf's father either. You see, my husband in a measure cut himself adrift from the Caernarvon Reeces when he went to London as a curate. They were such distant cousins, too. We

never expected to come into this property. It was only a rapid succession of deaths gave it to us."

Mrs. Reece was exceptionally frank and plain in her speech. She went on with her confidences, in no wise unwilling to have so interested a listener.

"Then, too, old Bernard Reece—young Bernard's father—was such a disagreeable brute no one cared to have much to do with him. He was a terrible miser, and loved nothing better than hoarding up his money. Young Bernard loved nothing better than to spend it, so you may imagine there were awful rows between the father and son at times. Old Bernard used to threaten his son that if he didn't turn over a new leaf he would leave half his money to the county asylum. Young Bernard did not turn over a new leaf, and when his father's will was read he found that every penny the old man could leave away from the estate was bequeathed to the asylum. Bernard, in disgust, threw up

the house and sailed for New York within a week of his father's funeral. Afterwards he went on to Bermuda, where he died about three years after his father. Meantime, this place was left in the hands of servants. Bernard said whoever liked might look after it, and it fell into its present dilapidated state. They tell me—at least Oscar tells me—it is all but a ruin. Of course I can't see for myself what it's like, and Oscar always speaks—well, let us say poetically. Now, tell me, Judith, does it seem to you in a terrible state of dilapidation? I know you are fond of speaking the truth."

But Judith was burning to hear more of Bernard and his careless, headstrong ways. The subject had a strange fascination for her.

"Why did he never marry?" she asked. "It was odd that a man of that sort should never have fallen in love."

"How do I know he never fell in love?" laughed Mrs. Reece. "I know so little

about him. I dare say he fell into love and out of love as many times as there are months in the year. Ask old Bryce about him, she can tell you his whole history if she chooses. She was his nurse from babyhood."

"Bryce was his nurse!" repeated Judith in astonishment.

Now Bryce (otherwise Nancy Bryce) was the housekeeper at The Grange, and was a person of whom Judith stood not a little in awe on account of her abrupt manners and rugged countenance. She was a woman close upon seventy years of age, and went about the house in short skirts and mob-cap. She acted as interpreter between Mrs. Reece and the other servants of the household, who only spoke Welsh, a language in which Bryce herself invariably indulged when crossed in her wishes or annoyed at any order for which she could see neither rhyme nor reason. She carried her head very high, she used a stick in walking up and down stairs, and had a habit of

muttering and talking to herself as she went about her duties.

Judith felt that her hopes of hearing more of Bernard Reece and his erratic career were at an end now. It would, she knew, be of as much use to question the great Egyptian Sphinx itself as Nancy Bryce, unless she volunteered to open her lips.



CHAPTER V.

THE days went by in an even monotony at the old Grange, a monotony that would have been absolutely insupportable to most girls of Judith's age. Wolf, waking up suddenly one day to the fact that she was a girl of nineteen, a visitor in their house, and had a right to expect some sort of entertainment at their hands, startled his mother with the query whether they ought not to provide her with amusement of some kind.

"She might as well be in a convent at once," he said, "cut off as she is here from all society."

"My dear," answered the shrewd Mrs. Reece, "don't you think this is exactly

what her father wished she should have—conventual seclusion without the objectionable religious part? Why did he send her to us if he did not wish her to be cut off from society? He knew perfectly well what he was doing. He must have scores of friends in London who could bring her out and introduce her and all that sort of thing, but no doubt he prefers that she should not make her first appearance in society till he can be by her side, and look after her himself. And he's quite right too. The only mistake he made in the matter was in ignoring the existence of my grown-up sons, but no doubt he thought you must be married by this time, and that Oscar would be well out of her way at college."

"Oughtn't she to have a horse, and keep up her riding?" persisted Wolf, feeling in his own mind that something ought to be done, though altogether dubious what the something should be.

"And who is to ride out with her, I

should like to know?" queried Mrs. Reece. "Are you prepared to give up your sermon-writing and go for a two hours' canter over the hills every morning? By-the-bye, my dear, when will that book of sermons be finished? They ought to be something super-excellent from the time you've spent over them."

This question sent back Wolf, silenced, to his lair.

It seemed to be a received theory in the household that the solitary hours he passed in the library were spent in sermon-writing. Judith did not believe it. For one thing, in her brief survey of the large centre-table she had noted that neither books nor manuscripts lay upon it; the pen-tray also was simply buried in dust; in the black-marble inkstand the ink had dried away. Wolf himself had drawn her attention to the fact that the lamp in the centre of the table had not been trimmed since the day of old Bernard's funeral. Candles there were none in the room, and without light at that

table anything but the wildest hieroglyphics would have been an impossibility.

The thought pressed upon her intermittently, if not sermon-writing, what could that silent, abstracted man be doing through those long hours in that desolate room? She had set herself to make a collection of Welsh field-flowers, and sometimes as she wandered along some pleasant bowery lane a glance up at those dark windows of the old Grange would set her shuddering and thinking. She would shut her eyes and conjure up a mental picture of that library interior with all its dreary details. The odour of damp and dust would seem to smite her senses once more; the handsome face of Bernard Reece would smile down on her from the wall; and there, seated opposite to it, looking up at it with solemn, lack-lustre eyes, she could picture to herself Wolf, with elbows resting on the table, and upturned, haggard face.

This likeness of Wolf thus seated somehow took possession of her brain, and

seemed to haunt her. She had no conscious perception of the monotony of the days that went by, so charged did they seem to her with meaning and mystery. The very air of the place seemed laden with something. What could it be—an untold story—a dismal secret?

She had been brought up in an atmosphere of legend and tradition. From her earliest years her Aunt Maggie had instilled into her brain stories of the MacIvor race. How they had left their highland home and settled among their lowland brethren, an altogether superior, yet nevertheless despised, people, with their hand against every man, and every man's hand against them; how they swore to and bled for the holy Covenant; how they fought for their king and country; what bitter persecutions, starvations, and imprisonments they had endured; how they were despised, afflicted, tormented; what miraculous escapes they had had at times from pursuing enemies—how at last they had come triumphantly

out of all their troubles, settled down peacefully as good money-making citizens, and had bequeathed large fortunes to their children and children's children.

Then also Uncle Pierre's one idea of education had been the laying a solid foundation of church history and legendary lore. Books by the score — infantine, juvenile, or for "those of riper years" — had found their way to her hand, filled with the histories of prophet, saint, and martyr.

Or, in the long summer evenings, as, side by side, he and she had strolled under the trees of the neatly-kept, broad walks of Villa Rosa, with a big yellow moon overhead, and the croak and hum of a hundred thousand twilight creatures growing faint and fainter as darkness crept over the land, he had, in his soft, even monotone, related these sacred stories, explaining here, adding a picturesque, life-giving touch there, till the girl, with strangely-aroused fancy, had imagined herself living and moving

among the heroic actors of those bygone tragedies, and would occasionally oddly mix up the doughty deeds of her own lusty Scotch ancestors with those of the early martyrs of the Catholic Church.

It was certainly strange that this oddly-paired brother and sister should each have assailed their young niece on the same side of her nature—the poetic. As might be expected, her imaginative faculties were prematurely developed, and, when the run of the library was granted to her, the works of the great poets, the volumes of ancient myth and legend, were those she fell upon and devoured. They served her in good stead, however; they gave her—or if they did not give, helped to develope in her—that most precious of all gifts — poetic insight.

When she came as a visitor to this old Welsh Grange, the young girl, to a certain extent, brought her atmosphere with her, and saw and judged her surroundings through its medium.

To her the grey old rooms and dim corridors seemed echoing with sad whisperings and mournful voices, or else sullen and heavy with mysteries and unrevealed secrets. Even the room which had been set apart for her on the sunniest side of the house, and which had been—at Oscar's suggestion—slightly furbished up and supplied with some modern furniture in addition to the old, seemed begirt with the same air of significant mystery.

Often and often did Judith lie awake half through the night listening to what seemed to her soft raps against the window-panes, or on one of the many doors the room owned to. Or sometimes, half asleep, she would start up in bed thinking she heard her name called, and expecting to see some weird, misty shape spin itself out by her bedside.

A feeling of intense curiosity took possession of her at times, occasionally so great as almost to compel her to rise from her bed, dress herself, and make the tour of the old

house in the dead of night, searching for she knew not what.

All terror of the supernatural seemed to have died in her heart, merged in this one deep longing to get to the bottom of something unfathomable and impenetrable, yet ever at hand.

In the morning, as the warm July sun streamed into her room, fancies, curiosities, and longings fled away together ; but none the less as the silence of night fell on the small household, true as the stars themselves would they troop back again and hold sway till dawn once more.



CHAPTER VI.



OVER and above midnight fancies the noonday realities at the old Grange gave abundant food for thought to a young person fond of wondering and puzzling over mysteries, of conjuring the Possible out of the Actual. Wolf's odd, silent ways, his persistent habits of seclusion, were, however, the things which seemed to niche themselves most firmly in her brain—in fact, were seldom or never out of it. What did it all mean? Had he, a minister of God's Church, committed some heinous sin from whose consequences he found it impossible to free himself? Or had he, all unwittingly, been made the depositary of some guilty secret, and did

he, vicariously, endure, the torments of another's stricken soul.

The more she wondered over it, the darker the matter grew to her.

Oscar had, in moments of confidential talk, told her much of the hard-working, hard-living days they had gone through at the East End of London. Specially he had loved to dwell upon Wolf's incessant activity among the poor and sick, his habits of rigid self-denial, his devotion to his mother and brother.

"Where we should have been without him, I don't know," Oscar had exclaimed enthusiastically, after an hour of declamation on the matter. "He denied himself food, and the commonest necessities of life, to pay for my books and schooling. Why, he lived on turnips and potatoes for nearly six months to pay my mother's doctor's fees when she first grew blind. She did not know it, for he always took care she should have meat on her plate, but he did it all the same. I say, Judith, I should like you

just to have seen us all when the news came that the Grange had fallen to Wolf. Wolf stipulated that every penny we had, every article of furniture and clothing, should be given to the poor people in the neighbourhood. I was jolly glad to get rid of my old shiny coats, I can tell you. Then the first money he drew from the estate he put untouched into the offertory-bag. I say, Judith"—this *sotto voce*, with a nervous look towards the door—"you mustn't think Wolf was always the queer, silent fellow he is now. Something like a blight seemed to fall upon him on the very first day we set foot in the Grange. He had given orders for all sorts of repairs to be done here, and we were going in for decoration on a grand scale. Suddenly he puts a stop to everything, packs off the workmen before they've so much as time to get their tools out of their baskets, and from that day to this won't hear a word about painters and glaziers. Isn't it queer?"

Judith certainly thought it was queer,

and the more she thought over the whole thing the queerer it seemed to her. It was well-nigh an impossibility for her to link the past life of this man with his life in the present, to identify the hard-working, self-denying benevolent clergyman with the gloomy, taciturn man, who seemed willing to ignore the existence of every living soul in the house, and to have no thought nor desire in life beyond the attainment of complete, unbroken solitude and seclusion.

Mrs. Reece also, as confidence grew between her and Judith, adverted to the change that had taken place in her son.

“He was so bright and cheerful in our hard times; it seems strange he should grow sad and silent now that times are easy,” she said.

The alteration in him, however, did not seem to her so marked as it did to Oscar, who, with his keen young eyesight, noted a variety of small details of which she was necessarily ignorant.

Not only did Wolf and his eccentricities

occupy Judith's thoughts at this time. After a while a second person came in for a large share of her observation.

This person was old Nancy Bryce, of the rugged countenance and short petticoats.

Judith had felt something of an antipathy to old Nancy from the first day she had set foot in the house. Why it was she could scarcely explain to herself, but she certainly took it into her head that for some purpose of her own Bryce was playing the part of a spy. She felt positive, also, that the old woman bore no good-will towards the Reece family, and was convinced that those soft sibilant Welsh sentences she was perpetually muttering about the house were nothing more nor less than a string of anathemas upon the present master and mistress of the Grange.

Mrs. Reece in no wise shared Judith's feelings towards Bryce; she would speak of her as a faithful old retainer, a good old body, who looked well after her (Mrs. Reece's) interests in the house.

Judith had volunteered to spend an hour or so every morning in reading to Mrs. Reece. The hour was, however, more frequently than otherwise spent in long pleasant chats, in which the elder lady talked freely of her own early married life, of her dead husband, and of her children. Of the former she drew a portrait so graphic and life-like, that Judith felt sure it must be a true one.

“My first Wolf,” she said, “was hard-working and self-denying like my second, but he was not so strong a man in will, nor so decisive and abrupt in manner. He was nervous and vacillating at times. It cost him so much to say an unkind or harsh word, that he was frequently silent when he ought to have spoken. I think it was his excessive timidity of giving offence that taught me plain-speaking. Some one has to do the disagreeable part of life, the skirmishing, aggressive and defensive ; if the husband gets behind the hedge, depend upon it the wife comes to the front and gets

the scars. Now, my second Wolf errs in the opposite direction. Some people used to say he was too harsh on the sins of the poor people who formed his flock, did not make allowance enough for their temptations and ignorances when he told them of their sins. He would call a man a liar to his face. 'Sir,' one man said to him, 'if I had not told that one lie, and said I hadn't been sent to gaol when I had, I should have got no work, and then I and my wife would have starved.' 'Better starve than tell lies,' I heard Wolf reply, and I haven't the least doubt that if he had been in that man's place he would have starved. Ah, well! we were near enough to starvation more than once in those days, but, thank Heaven, our temptations were never greater than we could bear. Thank Heaven we came out of it all unscathed!"

Judith fell to wondering whether Wolf would echo his mother's thanksgiving. Also supposing he could be for one short week restored to his ministry among the

poor people, would he be quite so harsh in his judgments on them, quite so confident of his own power of resisting evil?

Her wonderings carried her farther. Should she ever see him in the pulpit preaching the doctrines of repentance and faith? Should she ever hear him reading the beautiful prayers of the Church, pronouncing absolution on the penitents kneeling around him?

She shut her eyes, and tried to picture him kneeling and praying beside the death-bed of some sinner, or standing, white-robed, within the altar rails, speaking words of peace and benediction. No; she could not do it. His vehement, half-defiant words about one who sought, but could not find, repentance, would ring in her ears, out-sounding the gospel-words of peace and blessing; his white, haggard face—a face that seemed to have sin as well as sorrow written upon it—would rise up before her, and make to vanish the calm and holy one she had tried to image. She could picture

him in the regal garb of a conscience-stricken Macbeth, in the goatskin even of a red-handed Cain; but in the white robes of a minister of God—no.

It is true she had heard him read the household prayers night and morning ever since her coming to the house, but they were in Welsh, not in English; they touched no chord in her heart, possibly they touched none in Wolf's. At any rate he read them in perfunctory style with voice pitched on one note which neither rose nor fell, and with eyes fixed and expressionless.

His manner of reading these prayers had struck her on the first morning of her arrival.

"They are in Welsh, for the sake of the servants," he had explained to her as he had opened his book.

Then he had seemed to harden and straighten his features, and he had gone through the prayers from beginning to end without so much as an inflection in the

dry, hard monotone to which his voice had risen.

All this had flashed through Judith's mind as Mrs. Reece ceased speaking. The elder lady did not remark her silence; indeed, if the truth be told, it was a circumstance she rarely remarked in any one, although the opposite condition of things was apt on occasions to bring forth vehement comment from her lips. Possibly it was Judith's wonderful aptitude for playing the part of listener that had first warmed and opened the old lady's heart towards her.

"She is one of the sweetest girls I ever met," she said very loud, and very often, in Wolf's presence, "and our morning hour together is the pleasantest I have known for many a long day past."

The morning hour was, however, interrupted on this particular morning by Bryce, who came in to ask for some more wool for the stocking-knitting that went on below-stairs. "Those idle girls had scarcely any-

thing to do from morning till night, and would waste their time in gossip and nonsense if they weren't set to work." She grumbled.

"Nothing to do!" thought Judith, "and so many rooms in that undusted, cobwebby condition!"

It always seemed to her that the maids had more on their hands than they knew how to get through; that the house, from top to bottom, suffered from an insufficiency of servants. If Mrs. Reece had but had her eyesight for five minutes, surely she could have found the maids ample employment independently of stocking-knitting.

Mrs. Reece, however, had not her eyesight, so all she did was to pull a heavy skein of yarn from her ample work-basket. Judith took it from her and handed it to Bryce.

The old woman was about to take it when suddenly the ring on Judith's right hand caught her eye. A look of horror overspread her brown wrinkled face. She

drew back a step, pointing to the ring, and shaking her head to the skein of wool.

"I take nothing from that hand," she cried, retreating farther and farther. "Take it off—take it off, Miss Judith, if you don't want to bring a curse upon the house!"

The ring was a large bloodstone, in antique setting. It had belonged to an ancient MacIvor, and Judith had worn it for the first time that morning.

She slipped it off her finger immediately. She was accustomed to superstitions. The people of St. André had had enough and to spare. She had loved to hear them tell their quaint stories of bird, or tree, or flower. To her they were all wild, beautiful tales, the outcome of some deep human feeling, or founded on the fragments of some ruins of a bygone religion.

"No doubt," she thought, "Bryce has in her mind some fantastic Welsh story of love and blood-shedding, which would

be well worth the hearing. Will you take it now, Bryce?" she asked, as she once more proffered the wool, while not even the shadow of a smile showed itself about the corners of her mouth.

Bryce shook her head.

"Your hand must be dipped thrice in the stream that runs through the wood," she said in her harsh, creaking voice, "before it will be as the hand of a Christian again. St. Govan once, wearied with his journey, stopped and bathed his blessed feet in it on his way to the cil in the mountains. It will cleanse your hand as nothing else will. Lay the skein on the floor."

"Very well," said Judith, laying the wool on the floor at the old body's feet. "This afternoon I shall be in the wood, and will make a point of dipping my hand three times in the stream, kneeling, I suppose, with my face to the east; will that be right?"

"What is it all about?" asked Mrs.

Reece, dropping her work and adjusting her spectacles on her high nose, just as though they were of real use to her.

Wolf, coming in at that moment, repeated the question.

As he entered, Bryce passed out of the room, giving, what seemed to Judith, one backward look of ill-will at her master as she went.

“What is that about dipping your hand in the stream with your face to the east?” he asked in his usual short, hard tones.

Judith explained Bryce’s dread of the bloodstone.

Wolf laughed outright, the harsh, unpleasant laugh of scorn, not that of goodwill and merriment.

“What rubbish can the old body have got into her head?” he exclaimed. “I know nearly every tradition or superstition that ever existed in this part of the country, and I never heard anything against the bloodstone. It must be some old family legend she’s treasuring up, depend

upon it. The bloodstone may be of evil omen to the Reece family exclusively. Lend it to me, Miss Wynne; I have a great fancy for defying family tradition."

Before Judith could regain possession of her ring, he had slipped it on his little finger.

"There, now I'm prepared to be the family scapegoat," he said with the same unpleasant laugh as before. "Will you wear my diamond in exchange, or is the diamond a stone of ill-omen to the Wynnes? I would not like to import ill-luck into your family."

He held out his diamond-ring as he spoke. Judith hesitated only one moment, then slipped his big ring on her forefinger. It hung there loosely enough.

"If I lose it, it will be your fault, and, please, I must have my bloodstone back again. It's all but an heirloom," she said laughingly, registering meantime a mental resolve that on the very first opportunity she would endeavour to coax Bryce into

telling her the legend of the bloodstone-ring.

As for Mrs. Reece, this exchange of rings between the young people brought a sudden rush of gladness into her old heart. It seemed to her an omen of success to a wish that of late she had begun to cherish.



CHAPTER VII.

THE opportunity Judith desired came the very next day without any seeking on her part.

She was walking, in the cool of the evening, on the terrace that ran the length of the old house, book in hand, when suddenly she heard Bryce call to her, "Miss Judith! Miss Judith!" in low, hurried tones.

Looking up she saw the old body's mob-cap and wrinkled face peering out at her from among the laurels which half-screened the window of the housekeeper's room.

Judith closed her book. "What is it?" she asked, at the same time making

up her mind that if Bryce wanted anything of her she should pay for it with the story of the bloodstone-ring.

She parted the laurels and looked into the small, dark room. It was low-ceiled and oak-wainscoted like every other room in the Grange. From floor to ceiling it was well supplied with the cupboards and shelves supposed to be the indispensable accessories to good housekeeping. On a small table under the window was Bryce's work-basket, containing her knitting-pins and the skein of stocking-yarn unwound still.

"Miss Judith, I want to know a something," reiterated Bryce. "Will you tell me why the master is wearing that ring—the ring that was on your hand yesterday—the ring that'll bring no good to him, nor to any one of us?"

There was something of fierceness, something of terror, in the old woman's voice.

"Now is the time," thought Judith, "for

the story." She looked down at the work-basket. "Why, haven't you wound your wool, Bryce? Are you afraid of it because I touched it? Shall I come in and show you how we used to wind our balls in France? My hand is clean now, I dipped it three times in St. Govan's stream just as you told me."

She did not wait for Bryce's invitation to enter, but, as she finished speaking, opened a side door leading into the housekeeper's room, and went in.

Bryce, with a sour face, placed a chair for her, entering her protest meantime against French methods of winding wool, against everything, indeed, that was not purely national and indigenous.

"I never did like foreign ways," she grumbled. "It was all Master Bernard's fondness for foreign parts that brought ill-luck to him."

The mention of the name of this luckless son of the house set Judith's ears tingling. She would a hundred thousand

times sooner have heard his history than the legend of the bloodstone-ring!

"Was Master Bernard always fond of travelling?" she asked Jesuitically, trying to give the conversation another turn, and leaning forward with her arms on the table, an expectant listener.

But Bryce was more eager to ask than to answer questions at that particular moment. She gave a succession of brief nods which might be taken for affirmations, or might stand (so Judith thought) for the Welsh equivalent of "Don't bother me with questions when I have something of my own to ask!" Then she laid her bony hand on Judith's arm.

"Tell me, Miss Judith," she persisted, "why you and the master have changed rings. Are you lovers? What does it mean?"

Judith laughed outright.

"Lovers! No, indeed," she answered frankly enough. "I never had a lover in my life. I am expected to wait for

my lovers till my father comes home and allows them to me. I have had this notion drilled into my brain ever since I was seven years old—long before I knew what lovers meant.”

“Then why did you change rings with him? Why?—why? In Wales, when a man and woman change rings, they mean to marry each other, and do marry, unless one comes between them.”

“And so they do in other parts of the world besides Wales—unless they change rings for fun. We only did it for fun.”

Bryce shook her head.

“I don’t like such fun. It’s ill trifling over evil things,” she muttered.

“Now, why is that stone evil? You must tell me. It’s a beautiful stone.”

“It’s an evil stone, Miss Judith, with an evil name. It’ll bring a curse upon the house, take my word for it.”

“Now, if it had been that stone,” and here Judith touched the brooch—an onyx with which Bryce had pinned her kerchief,

"I could have understood it. The people at St. André had a queer story to tell about onyx brooches, Bryce."

Bryce fidgeted and looked uncomfortable.

"And I don't like my brooch to be called 'evil' without rhyme or reason, Miss Judith."

"And I don't like my ring to be called 'evil' without rhyme or reason," retorted Judith.

"But there is rhyme and reason for it," exclaimed Bryce vehemently. "Wasn't there a Bernard Reece found lying murdered nigh by the Ffynnon in the wood? He was Master Bernard's grandfather, the first Bernard in the family. Ah, no good ever comes of these outlandish names. All the squires in the old days were ever Owens or Glendowers. It's the three Bernards who brought all the ill-luck."

Bryce's sentence ended in a sigh and another shake of the head. It boded ill

for the gratification of Judith's curiosity. She endeavoured once more to lead the old woman back to the ring.

"You've a change of name now in the house," she said. "I should think a Wolfgang has never before been heard of in Wales. Perhaps it was only to the Bernards that the bloodstone brought bad luck."

Bryce shook her head again.

"It's not a change for the better, Miss Judith. It's a more outlandish name than the other. Wolfgang, indeed—heugh!"

Now Bryce's "Heugh!" Welsh guttural though it was, was suggestive, and easily understood. It stood mid-way between a shudder and an imprecation.

Judith met it as she would an argument in the mouth of an adversary.

"But for all that," she persisted, "it is possible that a Wolfgang may wear without any risk a ring that a Bernard shouldn't look at."

"Not that ring!" exclaimed Bryce with

an almost savage vehemence. "No Reece can wear that ring without bringing a murderer across his path. There, Miss Judith, I've told it you now! For the love of Heaven get the master to give you back your ring, and you drop it into the blessed stream where that other was dropped."

"What other? The one the murdered man wore?"

"Aye, and that his mother after him wore, too. Listen, Miss Judith. It doesn't follow because the master is wearing it that he'll be the one murdered; but as sure as he's a Reece he'll bring a murderer into the house. That's what he'll do."

"How did a bloodstone ever get into the house, Bryce? Tell me that," pleaded Judith.

"This way, Miss Judith. The first Bernard—our Master Bernard's grandfather—married a Scotch lady, a tall, bony, evil-looking woman, I've heard my

mother say. She was very poor, and very proud, and had to give up a lover of her own in Scotland to marry the Welsh squire. She was very silent, very high to the poor people, and never spoke a word to living soul if she could help it. They said she and her husband's mother—who lived in the house—hated each other like poison. She always wore a big bloodstone-ring, which some people said her first lover had given her. Anyhow, her husband hated to see her wearing it, and ordered her to give it to him. There were words over it, and she was obliged to give in. She flung it in his face, and cursed him in her own Scotch tongue, telling him the ring would bring a curse to him and to his children after him, and that sooner or later a murderer would cross his path. Her words were only too soon fulfilled. Within a month from that day Squire Bernard was found lying dead in the wood, stabbed and shamefully beaten about. His wife went

back immediately to her own people in Scotland, and did not so much as put on black for him. Then Madame Reece—Squire Bernard's mother—took the ring which the murdered man had worn, put it on her own finger, and remembering the words of the wicked woman's curse, prayed that it might bring her son's murderer across her path. And one night, as she lay in bed—in the very room you are sleeping in now, Miss Judith—there came to her bedside the evil Scotch lady, who told her how she couldn't rest in peace because of her sins; that she herself had first drugged and then murdered her husband in the wood, in order that she might go back to her first lover. Madame Reece sat up in bed, and called her a bitter name, and tried to catch her by the sleeve, but her hand seemed only to go through and through her. Then she made up her mind she had seen the wicked woman's wraith, and she rang the bell, and roused the house, and told them

all about it. And, sure enough, when they sent to the Scotch lady's people, they found that she and her lover had been drowned while out boating on a lake. There, Miss Judith, there's the story of the bloodstone, as my mother told it me; and a dismal enough story it is!"

It was a dismal story, and told in that damp, dark room, in Bryce's creaking tones, its dismalness became doubled.

Judith suddenly awoke to the consciousness that the sun had set, that the frogs were croaking drearily, that the evening was getting damp and chill.

"I think I'll say good-night, Bryce; it must be almost time for prayers," she said. "So Madame Reece dropped the ring into the stream when she had done with it. I think I should have kept it. It did, you see, as much good as harm, after all; it told the poor lady the truth about her son's fate. Good-night, Bryce. Some day, perhaps, you'll tell me some-

thing about your Master Bernard. I should like to hear his story."

"Miss Judith," pleaded Bryce, catching at the young girl's arm, "you'll get the master to give you back the ring? For all that things are not exactly what one would have; I wouldn't like worse to come to the house."

The last sentence was muttered in an undertone, and was evidently not intended for Judith's ears.

So Judith shut them, and went her way, wondering much over this old body's deep devotion to the Reece family, joined as it so oddly was with evident enmity to the present head of the house.

Nevertheless, somehow the talk she had had with Bryce had made her feel a little ashamed of the prejudices she had cherished against her. After all, there might be some foundation—slight or mistaken, perhaps—for the old servant's present discontent, though what that foundation was, she was utterly at a loss to imagine.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHEN Judith went to bed that night, her thoughts were full of the story of the bloodstone-ring.

“It would make a grand poem,” she thought to herself, as she stood in her bedroom window-recess, slowly unplaiting her long dark hair, and picturing to herself the murdered man lying beside the stream in the lonely wood, and the evil wife looking her farewell to him from the other side.

“Or a wonderful picture,” her thoughts went on; “if I could paint, it would be the sort of story I should delight in. I think I should choose the moment when

the old mother lay awake in bed—that bed, no doubt”—here she nodded at the old-fashioned, heavily-curtained four-poster, which formed her own couch—“ thinking of her murdered son, and the dead wife’s wraith came and stood by her side. Yes, it would make a wonderful picture. Why, the greatest artist who ever painted might find a wraith beyond him. Dante might perhaps have done it if he had been a painter instead of a poet. Fancy being able to paint a soul! To put all the regret, and sorrow, and pain into one look, and print the look on air!”

Here she let fall her heavy plaits, unlocked her casemented window, and leaned out into the still, night air.

It was early yet, barely ten o’clock, but everything round and about the Grange was as quiet as though it had been midnight. The moon was bright, but not at its highest; the gardens below Judith’s window lay in the deepest shadow; the wood beyond caught the white beams

on the tops of the highest trees only, but the blue mountains, which towered in the near distance, were literally steeped in the white light. Every jutting crag and fantastic point stood distinctly outlined in all its weird whimsicality against the limpid sky.

Odd thoughts began to shape themselves in Judith's brain. If those rocks could for an instant take to themselves a human voice what strange stories they might tell of wandering prince or dying chieftain, heroic martyr, or feeble anchorite! What secrets some of those dark hollows must hold, what terrible scenes of violence, marauding, and perhaps murder, those sharp, overhanging crags must have looked down upon!

The whole scene, in all its wild desolateness, had a strange fascination for her. She found it difficult to tear herself away from it to complete her toilette for the night. She closed her window with a sigh, but left the blind and curtains widely

withdrawn, so that even from her bed she could see the beautiful, shadowless night-sky, and the grand curves and castle-like turrets of the darkblue rocks.

The moonlight and the rocks, as might be expected, filled her dreams. In fancy she crossed the dark wood in the dead of night, and stood alone at the foot of the mountains looking up at the round summer's moon. It poured its light full upon the earth at her feet; every tiny weed, every branchlet of moss, was outlined in unerring distinctness, and moment by moment the light that fell upon them seemed to grow clearer and stronger. But, strange to say, every ray that fell upon the earth seemed to leave the moon by so much the darker; it seemed absolutely emptying itself of its light, literally pouring it out upon the earth ray by ray, silently, slowly, ceaselessly, till it hung a great, dark, empty orb in the midst of the heavens.

In her dream Judith felt a great awe

steal over her. The sky above seemed a great, dull, heavy blank; the earth, which lay at her feet, too bright and dazzling for human steps to tread. A terror took possession of her. This harsh, glittering white light, what horrors and secrets all round would it not lay bare to her eye! A prayer rose to her lips, "Lord, keep Thy great pure light for the heaven of heavens, on earth let shadow and darkness encompass us still." And then she drew a long breath and awoke.

What was it that had awakened her? she asked herself as she sat upright in bed, and listened intently for the repetition of some noise which had distinctly crossed her dreams. It could not have been the striking of the clock, for at that moment the one in the hall below sounded the hour, three distinct bells. She had been asleep, then, longer than she thought, four or five hours, and it had seemed only like a five minutes' doze. Hark! and she held in her breath and strained

her ears to listen—there it was again. A footfall at her door, a rustling out in the corridor, it seemed to be. For a moment the blood rushed from her heart to her brain. A deadly coldness seized her. What if some poor, lost, restless soul were to come and stand by her bedside, as once before one had stood on the self-same spot, confessing a terrible crime. She stretched out her hand, almost expecting it to be seized in some damp, clammy touch, pushing aside the chintz curtains of her bed, so as to get a clear view of her room. The moonlight was flooding every corner of it now. The commonplace tables and chairs had a weird poetic appearance, which in the garish light of day they utterly lacked. Some new furniture had been placed in it to supplement the old, half-worn-out articles, and in broad daylight the room wore an air of jauntiness, of semi-renovation, of I-would-if-I-couldness, which belied its past history. All this, however, had vanished

in the mystic light of the moon, the very air of the room seemed poetised, etherealised. Its past days of uncanniness seemed to have crept back upon it. A whole army of restless, antiquated spirits trooping in and out of the corners, opening and shutting the high cupboard-doors, peering and gleaming here, there, everywhere, would in no wise have seemed out of place amid these eerie surroundings.

Judith felt herself growing colder and colder. She strove, by a strong exercise of will, to get back her courage.

"It's all fancy, I know," she said, speaking out as loudly and bravely as she dared; "my ears must have deceived me. I will just open my door, and make sure no one is there, then I'll light a candle and read myself to sleep again."

She slipped out of bed, with bare feet made her way to the door, and softly turning the handle, looked out.

Not a soul was to be seen, not a sound was to be heard. In the corridor was

deepest, blackest night, broken only by a thin, white stream of moonlight, which the opening of her door had let out into it. Something glittered in this stream of light on the floor at her feet, and, stooping down, Judith picked up what seemed to her an antiquated shawl-pin, made in the shape of an arrow, and either of gold or gilt brass. It was very odd. Some one, then, had been down that corridor in the dead of the night. Who could it have been? Well, anyhow, she would take possession of the pin, and speak to Mrs. Reece on the matter the next morning.

She was about to return to her room, when at this moment another sound fell upon her ear. It was a groan, or rather moan, as of someone in a fainting-fit or breathing heavily. A quick terror entered her mind. Had robbers broken into the house and half murdered someone, perhaps one of the servants, perhaps Wolf, who was always wandering about the house late at night?

She snatched her dark, thick dressing-gown, which lay on a chair near the door, tossing the old gold-pin on a small table standing by, and with swift, silent steps made her way along the corridor, pausing once at the head of the staircase to listen whence the sound came.

She could hear nothing, however; everything seemed still and vault-like below; but leaning over the oak balustrade, she could see a narrow thread of light showing under one of the many doors which opened into the hall. She rightly guessed it came from the library, and with still the one thought in her mind of someone lying wounded and injured, she ran down the stairs, and groped her way to this door. On the threshold she paused in a thrill of horror, for there, white and motionless, lay Wolf on the floor, almost at her feet. His chair—Bernard Reece's chair—lay overturned by his side, and there was an ugly bruise on his forehead,

made possibly by the sharp edge of the table as he fell.

A candle burned feebly on the high mantelpiece. In other respects the room was exactly as when she had last seen it, dust and damp clinging everywhere, and the frank, handsome face of Bernard Reece smiling down upon it all.

She felt certain now that Wolf had been attacked and wounded by someone attempting to enter the house. She kneeled down by his side, raised his head, pillowing it on some heavy folios which lay at hand, and was about to cross the room to ring for help, when he suddenly opened his eyes, caught the hem of her dress, and held her tightly.

Then he began to talk rapidly, and, it seemed to Judith, deliriously, as one not knowing what he said.

"Whoever you are, don't leave me," he implored: "for Christ's sake don't leave me! He had pity even for murderers! I'm not that—no, not that. I tell you

I will have nothing to do with bloodshedding. I am a man of God—do you hear, a man of God?” Here he raised himself on his elbow, and looked wildly around him, still holding the affrighted girl by her gown. “I prayed to God as I have prayed here, night after night, I tell you. I vowed to Him I would not touch one penny of the gold more than was absolutely needed, that I did it for them not for myself, that I would give it all up by-and-by, and I prayed to God to let me keep it all for a time. I say for a time. And I prayed Him to-night, just as I have prayed on other nights, to let the dead man’s soul come back and speak one word to me. Then out of the mist and darkness something came—a shadow, a shape. It drew nearer—nearer. ‘He comes at last,’ I thought; ‘if he knows what I have suffered his words will be peace and blessing, not a curse.’ It stood by my side I could have touched it as I sat. I looked up in its face. Oh God! It was my own;

white—white—white was the face, but the hands were red with blood!”

His words ended in a gasp, he sank back on the floor, loosing his hold of Judith's dress; his eyes closed once more, and the heavy breathing recommenced.

Judith felt herself shaking from head to foot. What was to be done? She dared not rouse the household to see their master in this condition; to say truth, she trembled for the next words he might utter. Yet help of some sort she felt he must have. There would surely be some water in the dining-room, and wine or brandy in the cellaret. This she herself could easily procure. She took the candle from the mantelpiece, made her way quickly across the hall, and returned with both water and brandy. Then again kneeling by Wolf's side, she bathed his bruised forehead, and, slightly raising his head, held the brandy to his lips. Little by little, she contrived to get him to swallow some; consciousness slowly

returned ; he opened his eyes and now recognised her.

“You here, Judith?” he exclaimed—it was the first time he had ever called her by her Christian name—“how is this? Surely it is the middle of the night. Did I call out? I must have fainted, I suppose.” Again he raised himself on his elbow ; a shudder passed over him. He caught Judith’s hand. “Is anyone else here?” he asked. “Tell me, have I been talking? How did you find out I had fallen?” He spoke vehemently, rapidly, his voice growing stronger and more natural in tone.

Judith felt nervous, distressed, and compassionate all in one. How her heart ached for this man in his hopelessness and misery!

“Please drink some more brandy,” she entreated. “No one is here but I. I heard you fall, I suppose, and came down thinking thieves were in the house. Oh, you talked nonsense, nothing more ; people often ramble when they lose their senses in a fit, don’t you know. Shall I ring for Bryce, or

Davies"—Davies was the man who combined the offices of butler and coachman in the Reeces' establishment.

Wolf sat upright on the floor.

"No, don't ring," he said; "I shall get up and be all right again in a minute. Yes, I was only talking nonsense, as you say, I don't suppose you could remember a word of what I said, if you tried?"

"No, no, no," answered Judith, trying to put it all out of her thoughts; "at least," she added, correcting herself, "I could not repeat it if I tried ever so hard."

Wolf looked at her keenly.

"Put that chair, please, close to my hand. No, thanks; you are not strong enough to help me up. So—thank you!" With something of an effort he struggled to his feet again, still keeping his eye almost sternly fixed on the white, trembling girl. "Now, will you kindly try, Miss Wynne, to repeat to me, word for word, what I did say, as nearly as you can remember it? I shall be infinitely obliged to you if you

will make the effort ;” this was added in his usual hard tone.

Judith could scarcely keep the tears from her eyes, and spite of effort they would make themselves heard in her voice.

“ Oh, please do not ask me,” she implored ; “ whatever you said I shall try to forget ; and oh, do be sure it will be sacred to me—no word of it will ever pass my lips to living soul ! ”

Wolf looked down into her white face for a moment.

“ I believe you,” he said below his breath ; “ I can trust you. I see truth itself in your eyes. Poor child ! ” he added pityingly, “ how frightened you look ! Come, let me take you back to your room. Think of it all as some nightmare you have had. I give you my word of honour it shall never occur again.”

He drew Judith’s unresisting hand within his own arm as he finished speaking. He was perfectly calm and self-possessed now, she tremulous and ill at ease. Nothing

more was said till they reached her bedroom door, when, with the briefest and coldest of good-nights, they parted.

Judith almost staggered into her room, and sank down into the first chair she came to, trying to collect her thoughts. What a bewildering night it had been! What months seemed to have passed since she had lain down to rest on that moonlighted bed! Her dream had been strange and oppressive enough, but what had followed had been so doubly, trebly strange as almost to have swept that from her memory.

What did it all, could it all mean?

In the first place, who could have been outside her door in the dark corridor? That, in any case, could not have been Wolf, for he would not have been likely to carry about with him antique shawl-pins, and drop them as he went along.

Well, she had possession of that pin, at any rate, and would take good care of it. Sooner or later it might lead to the identification of the midnight wanderer.

Mechanically she stretched out her hand, feeling for the pin on the little table where she had placed it, so as to have one more look at it. Felt for it, groped for it in the dark; but mystery upon mystery!—it was no longer there? She lighted her candle; she searched for it till a candle was no longer necessary, for the daylight that came streaming in at the windows; but with no result.

The conclusion was unavoidable. Someone must have entered her room while she was absent, and regained possession of it. Someone, perhaps, who had dogged her footsteps about the house, and listened to Wolf's wild ravings as he lay on the floor. It was too dreadful to think of. Judith felt her brain going round, and her limbs beginning to fail her.

This was the final stroke to the night's bewilderment and terror. She threw herself on her bed, closed her eyes, and tried to silence the whirl of thought that came sweeping down on her; tried to make

believe, as Wolf had suggested she should, that the whole thing, from beginning to end, was only a weird, wild nightmare, that had teased and tortured her poor brain with its grim phantasies.



CHAPTER IX.

THE birds sang loud and louder, the sun rose high and higher in the heavens, yet still Judith lay upon her bed, wide awake, her head aching, her very eyeballs feeling scorched and strained with the effort to solve the mystery, or, failing that, to believe that it was no mystery at all.

Over and over again she said to herself:

“No doubt it all admits of the simplest of explanations if I had but the common-sense to lay my finger on it.”

But, even as she said this, “common-sense” suggested that in this case the simplest explanation would be the least satisfactory to accept, for it would prove

Wolf to be a man with a burdened, guilty conscience, and would establish the fact that this small household included in its number a spy, or possibly a plotter, who chose to wander about on some uncanny errand in the dead of the night.

The prayer-bell clanged through the house before she had roused herself from her bewildering thoughts to begin her morning toilette. She answered it with a counter-bell, desiring the maid to ask Mr. Reece not to wait for her appearance that morning.

Even as she was speaking to the girl, there came a sudden sharp sound against the window-panes of her room, as of the rattling of small pebbles, followed by a long, low succession of whistles, distinctly imitative of a skylark's song as it rises in the air.

Judith looked at the servant in amazement.

"Why, surely," she exclaimed, "that must be Mr. Oscar in the garden. He

used to wake me in that way every morning."

The girl nodded and smiled, and explained, half in Welsh, half in English, that Mr. Oscar had arrived at about seven o'clock that morning, having been travelling all through the night from London.

Judith got through her dressing with marvellous rapidity, and was seated at the breakfast-table almost as soon as the others.

It was a relief to see Oscar's bright, happy, handsome face again. It seemed to bring with it an atmosphere of everydayness, of common life from the outer world. That hearty grip of his hand, that semi-schoolboy slang in which he chose to indulge, did more to disperse the phantasms of over-night than any amount of hard-headed logic would have done.

He made open, undisguised love to her all through breakfast. More than once he got hold of her hand, and asked her

when she meant to marry him. To which query Judith replied successively, "When you have done growing," "When your education is finished," and finally, the more effectually to silence him, "When you have taken a double-first at Oxford."

She scarcely dared to look at Wolf, as they sat facing each other at table. Yet once or twice he seemed pointedly to address her, as though he wished their eyes to meet. His voice seemed to her to be drier and harder than ever. Or was it, perhaps, that she had fuller opportunity for noting its inflections? It might have been in honour of Oscar's sudden advent, but certain it was that since Judith's coming to the Grange he had never been so communicative at meal-times before.

"We are quite a cheerful party this morning," said Mrs. Reece, rejoicing in the unaccustomed flow of talk that supplemented the rattling of the coffee-cups.

"Cheerful, do you call this?" laughed

Oscar. "I wonder what you would call our breakfasts at The Retreat before Dean Swift makes his appearance; he's always a little late in showing, but makes up for lost time when he does come, I assure you."

The Retreat was the abode at Richmond, where Oscar was being "coached" for matriculation. Dean Swift was the master of it, and the respected "coach" of some half-dozen scatter-brained young fellows. He had been so nicknamed from the double fact of his owing to the patronymic of Martin, and to a portly person and slow lumbering tread.

"Yes, I can imagine you young fellows make a fine racket," said Mrs. Reece. "Now, which is the noisiest and wildest of you all—that Theo you write so much about?"

"It was Theo who pushed you into the river, and left you to struggle out the best way you could, wasn't it?" queried Judith.

"And I suppose it's Theo who borrows

your umbrellas and hats," pursued Mrs. Reece, "and forgets to return them? For the number of these articles you've got through this past two months has been something wonderful."

"And uncommonly nice she looks in my hats, too," said Oscar. "Not one of her Sunday-going bonnets suits her half so well as my old deer-stalker."

"Her!" exclaimed Mrs. Reece.

"Her!" echoed Judith, and even Wolf looked up with amazement written on his face.

"Her? Yes, of course," said Oscar, calmly. "I can't say 'suits she' can I?"

"But—but," stammered Judith, "we thought from your letters that Theo was a boy. She certainly plays boyish tricks."

"And so she is a boy—as veritable a tom-boy as ever lived, but for all that a dear little soul," answered Oscar.

"I suppose she is Mr. Martin's daughter?" questioned Mrs. Reece. "Why,

Wolf, you told me that there were no girls in the household at The Retreat."

"Mr. Martin told me that his youngest daughter was still in the schoolroom, his eldest daughter in Germany at a 'finishing' school, and that the household was presided over by an elderly maiden sister," answered Wolf.

"Ah, the elderly maiden sister is there safe enough," explained Oscar. "Theo is still in the schoolroom, in the sense of being always out of it, and Miss Leila returned from Strasburg about ten days or a fortnight ago."

"And what is Miss Leila like?" asked Judith, for her quick ear had caught an inflection in Oscar's tone as he pronounced the name, which roused her curiosity as to the young lady's personality.

"Oh, she's—she's—— Oh, I can't tell you what she's like. I'm never good at describing girls," answered Oscar with a transparent attempt at indifference. "Give me the coffee-pot, Wolf. Ah, I beg your

pardon, Judith; I forgot you ‘presided,’ as the novelists say, at the tea-tray now. In the old days, Wolf and I used to hawk the thing round the table as we wanted it.”

“It’s wonderful,” soliloquised Mrs. Reece, “what a number of girls there are everywhere! With the best wishes in the world to keep one’s sons out of their way, it’s almost an impossibility. If they go up to London and take rooms, and the landlady is as ugly as you could wish, there always turns up a landlady’s daughter in a day or two who is a good deal prettier than you could wish; if you let them go and stay with an aunt, a cousin is safe to make an appearance from some unexpected quarter; if you establish them in a respectable clergyman’s family with only an elderly maiden sister to look after him, young giddy daughters spring up miraculously, like mushrooms after a wet night, full-grown, ready for anything. No, there’s no escaping the girls, do what one will.”

“Or they come sailing over from France,” laughed Judith, “begging a home of you for two whole years, because they have no——”

But here Oscar put his hand over her mouth, and forcibly prevented the finish of her sentence.

“If Theo had dared speak like that,” he said, “I would have—no I wouldn’t have taken her out on the river for a month, nor bought her ‘sweeties’ for a year. But one doesn’t know how to punish you, Judith. Now I can always make Theo cry with trying.”

“And then, I suppose, you kiss and make it up again! Oscar, I think I should like to see this Theo. You seem such good friends with her and the other young lady her sister,” said Judith.

“And I should like you to see them also,” said Oscar, growing suddenly serious. “Mother, that was one of the things that brought me home in such a hurry. I wanted to ask you if you would invite the young

ladies down here for a few days. Dean Swift is going away on business for a week or so; all the fellows are off shooting or fishing: there is house-cleaning going on from top to bottom, and only the maiden aunt to keep us cheerful. Of course I bolted home here, and the girls said they wished they could bolt too."

"Invite them, mother; why not?" said Wolf, "It will be a little society for Miss Wynne. I am sure she must be dull enough sometimes."

"*'Miss Wynne,'*" thought Judith. "It was *'Judith'* last night." Then aloud she said: "I am never dull. I could never be dull in the summer in the country; but I should like immensely to see and know these two young ladies for Oscar's sake."

This added with a side-glance at his slightly reddening face.

Oscar jumped up all energy.

"And, Wolf, you really must get the old place furbished up a little before they come. Oh, you've no idea how grandly

atheistic—no, æsthetic—we all are at Richmond! Anything but a sage-green wall or a blue-tiled fireplace would be voted Philistinish in the extreme.”

“There’s green enough here of all shades to choose from,” said Wolf, moodily, rising from the table to avoid a discussion that had no attraction for him.

But Oscar was not to be silenced.

“You’ll let the place go to ruin—utter ruin. Think what the next-of-kin would say if he were any other than your respected and much-snubbed younger brother,” he exclaimed, heedless what argument he employed so long as Wolf’s eyes were opened to the deplorable condition of the Grange, and the absolute necessity that existed for repairs and renovation.

Wolf, in the act of leaving the room, turned and faced his brother.

“Get that notion out of your head at once and for ever, Oscar,” he said sternly. “The place is not going to utter ruin as you call it, and I do not intend that, under

my rule, it shall. Walls, roof, and flooring are all sound, and in good condition, and all necessary repairs are and shall be carried out. But what you would advocate in the way of decoration would mean simply outlay, year by year, that would bring in no return to living soul. Who would be the better for a half-dozen or so of extra servants in the house, cleaning, polishing, and spending money in every direction; or say, as many gardeners, hoeing, weeding, planting, watering one year, to unplant and rearrange the next? Talk about what you understand, but do not interfere with me in my management of the Grange."

As he said the last word he left the room.

It was a long speech for the usually curt, taciturn Wolf to make, and it was made with an undertone of meaning which two at least of his hearers failed to catch.

Oscar gave a long, low, whistle as the door closed on his brother.

"All the same, old man," he said, "I

shall go at you again at the very first opportunity on the very same matter. Don't shake your head, mother. Wolf needs a little crossing and thwarting now and then. He's a born autocrat, you know ; and I represent Parliament and the rights of the people. Come along, Judith, let's have the old greys out, and go for a spin somewhere or other. I've no notion of getting the blues on the very first day of my holidays."



CHAPTER X.



OSCAR spoke truly when he described Wolf as "a born autocrat." It was a fact patent to all.

Judith found no difficulty in crediting Mrs. Reece's statement that even in his first curacy, with a stipend of one hundred pounds a year, he had had his middle-aged vicar, and more than middle-aged churchwardens, completely under his thumb. He was emphatically a man born to wield a bâton rather than to wear a yoke. His simplest requests seemed to take the form of an order. The words "If you please," or "Be so kind," on his lips had the ring of a command in them.

After that one night of mystery and

terror, Judith, with her powers of observation strangely quickened, fancied that his imperiousness grew upon him hourly; that, in fact, it had resigned its previously passive form for one purely active and aggressive. His manner to her became increasingly abrupt, and more than once, as their eyes met at table, and on one occasion as he rose from his knees at morning prayer, there was an angry challenging look in his which seemed to say as plainly as words could: "If you think evil of me in your heart, say it right out at once. Tell everyone far and near, what manner of man I am. I can face it out."

Judith felt instinctively that this could be but a mood with him, that by-and-by it would pass, the inevitable reaction would set in, and his old gloomy indifference to men, women, and things about him would return with redoubled force. Every day, nay, almost every hour of every day, she found herself wondering over him, his

sorrows, and his secrets. She longed to raise up help for him in some quarter; more than once she felt tempted to rouse Mrs. Reece into energy on the matter, to bid her awake to the fact that her eldest son was having his heart burned to cinders with some concealed sorrow; but resisted the temptation, her better judgment telling her that such interference on her part would be deeply resented by Wolf, and little likely to lead to good results. Besides, she felt in a measure pledged to secrecy, not only as regarded the events of that one mysterious night, but also as to the facts which her own powers of observation had revealed to her. She felt the solemn promise she had given to Wolf in the library in the dead of night covered a good deal of ground, and she must religiously keep it. She could only wonder over the obtuseness of mother and brother, who could sit at the same table with him three times in the day, be in his company some six hours out of the

twelve, and not hear the under-note of pain in his voice, nor catch the dreariness of his every movement and action. Beyond a casual "Poor Wolf! I think he has a lot of business worries pressing on him just now," Oscar paid not the slightest heed to his brother's gloomy taciturnity.

"Is Oscar, like me, afraid of betraying his brother?" thought Judith; "or has he nothing but fishing-rods, guns, and dogs on his brain?"

It was all very puzzling, very distressing. With the best wishes in the world to stretch out a hand to help this man, she found it an impossibility. Her hands were tied, doubly tied; first, by the promise she had made him; secondly, and with a yet stronger knot, by the consciousness that she had surprised his sorrow; stolen, as it were, the knowledge of it, not had it communicated to her.

She went about the house feeling downcast and almost guiltily miserable. The

thought that some one else beside herself had possession of Wolf's secret, or at least a part of it, added not a little to her distress. She shrank, in a way she could not account for even to herself, from taking Mrs. Reece into her confidence on this matter, though the thought pressed upon her night and day: "Who was this person? What was he or she doing about the house in the middle of the night?"

Rightly or wrongly, somehow her suspicions settled upon old Bryce, who, for some unexplained reason, she felt confident bore no good-will to the master of the house.

Now anything more unlike to the gliding, supple motion of a Hindoo, than the hobbling, jerky gait of an ancient Welsh-woman could scarcely be imagined, yet somehow Judith never caught sight of the rugged face, the lean hand, the cavernous eyes of the old housekeeper, without recalling a certain native servant of her

father's, a man who eventually had been tried for and convicted of murder. It had all happened in her very young days, when, as a small child, she had gone with a black nurse for change of air to the hills with this man (a syce) in attendance. An English officer, a friend of Colonel Wynne's, had in some way offended him, and the Hindoo had waited and watched for his opportunity, and eventually had succeeded in shooting the officer through the heart. Judith, as a tiny child of seven, playing unperceived in a corner, had seen the Hindoo creep into the room, coil himself like a snake in his lair, watching for his chance.

It was odd all this should come into her head now, after having lain forgotten for so many years. It was odd, and it was unpleasant, but nevertheless so it was.

On the morning after that mysterious, troubled night, she daringly essayed to question Bryce as to the night she her-

self had passed, shaking Oscar off her arm, and going boldly into the house-keeper's room to do so.

Bryce answered with a roulade of sibilant Welsh, to which Judith returned fire with a round of easy French, informing the old body it was not polite to speak to people in an unknown tongue. Bryce replied with such a cannonade of consonants that Judith felt convinced they must be nothing less than anathemas, and in her turn she sent back a succession of short, jerky Scotch phrases picked up from aunt Maggie, in reality a string of Gaelic gutturals, intended to express such commonplaces as "The weather is fine," and "Hay at a discount."

Then they took breath, and looked at each other.

Bryce laid down her keys, and rested her chin in her lean, brown hand.

"It's grand to have so many languages at the tip of one's tongue," she said with

a sarcasm that would have more than passed muster on the floor of the House of Commons, where a little of the commodity is made to go a great way. "How many more do you keep in stock, Miss Judith?"

"Only one, Hindoostanee," answered Judith dolefully, "and I shall bring that out next time you speak to me in Welsh."

"I've neither time to listen or speak Welsh or English this morning, miss," said the old body, taking up her keys again. "What with those girls so lazy over their work, and Mr. Oscar coming upon us so sudden, I've enough to fill up two mornings instead of one."

"Oh," said Judith, essaying a bold stroke, "it's a wonder since you have so very much to do all day long that you do not sleep better at night. I should have thought you would have slept right off till at least six o'clock in the morning."

"And who can say that I do not sleep

right off till the morning, Miss Judith?" said the woman defiantly, leaning her elbows on the table that stood before her, and staring the young girl full in the face.

Judith laughed and fenced.

"Depend upon it, Bryce, it's all that wicked onyx brooch you will persist in wearing. Do you know," and here she lowered her voice to a mysterious whisper, "that the people at St. André say there is a wicked spirit shut up in the onyx stone, and that every evening at sunset it comes out and worries the people who wear it all through the night with bad dreams."

Bryce was startled, her deep-set eyes flashed a sudden interest.

"Is that true, Miss Judith—real truth?" she questioned. "Does a spirit come out and stand before you? A real spirit that you could ask questions of?"

She seemed to quiver with intense anxiety as she waited for her answer.

Even her hands, resting on the table, showed her nervous tremor.

“So the people at St. André used to say,” answered Judith, delighted to have produced an impression, and watching the old woman narrowly. “Of course now you will throw it away at once into the blessed St. Govan’s stream, after the bloodstone-ring. You won’t run the risk, I am sure, of seeing an evil spirit stand by your bedside in the dead of night?”

“Miss Judith,” exclaimed Bryce with a desperate eagerness, “I would have the Evil one himself stand by my side in the dead of night if he would only answer one question I’m wanting to ask. Yes, the Evil one himself,” she repeated, raising her voice to an almost hysteric pitch; “if I might ask him one question, I would lay down my life to have answered.”

“Ask it of me, Bryce,” said Judith quietly, feeling herself on the edge of another mystery now; “you know ladies are taught a great many things which

poor people never have time to learn. It is possible I might be able, in part, at any rate, to answer the question that is troubling you so much."

Bryce looked all round her furtively, nervously, as one might who had some guilty, treacherous deed on hand. She shut down the one window of the room, and coming close to Judith's side, bent low and whispered into her ear:

"Miss Judith, what I want to know is, why haven't the rooks come back? Look there" and she pointed to a clump of tall elms which, towering high above the smaller firs and limes, were hung at irregular intervals with the pretty plaited basket-homes of the rooks, now, alas! deserted and tenantless. "Look there, Miss Judith, once those trees were shaking and noisy with the stir and flutter in them; now they are silent as the yews in the graveyard themselves. On the last day of January, this year, they flew away. It was snowing hard, the sky was

low and black, and one and all they went away silently without a caw among them. Now, why haven't they come back? If the house had its right master——”

There came at this moment a rattle of sharp raps against the window-panes, which made the rotten old frame quake again.

“Judith, Judith! what are you doing all this time?” cried Oscar's voice from without. “You might as well be interred in a catacomb at once, as drone away the morning in that dreary old den. I have a hundred and one things I want you to do for me.”

Bryce started away from Judith like some guilty thing. Judith went regretfully out into the garden sunshine to talk nonsense with Oscar for the remainder of the morning.



CHAPTER XI.

THE The hundred and one things Oscar expected Judith to accomplish for him finally resolved themselves into two, the first of which was that she would get Wolf to buy him a hunter to take back with him to Richmond, "a superb creature he had heard of through a friend, that was literally going begging—could be had, in fact, for a mere song!"

"My dear boy," laughed Judith, "why not ask for yourself? He is your brother, not mine. You would be just as likely to get what you want for yourself as I should for you."

Oscar shook his head.

"It's just this, Judith. I've got as

much out of Wolf, one way or another, as I can reasonably expect for another month or six weeks. He's given me a boat of my own to keep at Richmond; he's given his consent—which means, he will supply the needful—to my going to Switzerland with the Martins this autumn, and to Rome with them in the winter; and he has more than half promised that my allowance shall be increased next year. Now, I'll confess I'm not a particularly modest individual, but I ask you, how is it possible, in the face of all this, to go up to him and say: 'I say, old fellow, I want something more out of you now—a nice, jolly hunter.'"

"No, I should say it was utterly impossible, and therefore I should give up the idea at once, for of course it comes to much the same thing whether you or I ask him," answered Judith, conscious of a strong repugnance to ask any favour at Wolf's hands, whether small or great, or, indeed, make any attempt to establish

a familiar, easy intercourse between them.

“Oh, it would not be at all the same thing,” protested Oscar vehemently. “You have such a nice, gentle way of doing things, I’d defy any man living to refuse you what you wanted. But if I went to Wolf, and begged it as the greatest favour he could grant me, it wouldn’t move him one atom. He’d simply say: ‘Not to be thought of for a moment; you’d begin with neglecting your studies, you’d end with breaking your neck.’”

“Well, I agree with Wolf; that is exactly what you would do. No, I decline the hunter affair altogether.”

Oscar began to growl.

“I can scarcely believe it of you, Judith. You always gave yourself out to be an amiable young woman. Now, if you call this amiability, let me tell you you are very much mistaken.”

“No, I won’t call it amiability, but obstinacy if you like it better. At any

rate, I mean to be obstinate. I will have nothing to do with the breakneck business."

"As if my neck were not my own, to break or otherwise as I see fit! Well, I suppose, as you scout the idea of amiability this afternoon, you'll say 'No' to my other request. Such a small one, too—a thing most girls would jump at doing for a fellow, and say: 'Oscar dear, give me something else to do for you; that's not worth calling a favour!'"

"Tell me what it is, and see whether I can 'jump at' doing it for you."

"Well, it's just this, Judith," and here Oscar broke off a big, fan-like bough of laurestinus which overshadowed the path, and handed it to Judith for an impromptu sun-umbrella: "I don't want you to give yourself a mountain of trouble in the matter, but I shall be very glad if you yourself will see that the rooms are clean and fit for young ladies to sleep in, supposing I can get the two Miss Martins

down here on a week's visit. My mother will just give old Bryce an order or two, which she will carry out or not as she thinks fit; and of course, as my mother has not her sight, she is obliged to trust entirely to the old cat. So I ask you, will you be so condescending as to take a survey of the rooms yourself, and see that everything is 'just so?'"

"Yes, I think I will condescend so far. But, mind, I shall expect a great deal of gratitude, and you mustn't trouble me often with such tremendous requests."

"And will you please bear in mind, when you make your survey, that in Richmond we live in a land of paper dados and beaten brasses, of sage-green plush and terra-cotta mantelpieces?"

"Ah no; I shall try to forget all about that. The thought of so much grandeur would paralyse my simple efforts at cleanliness and brightness. Fancy, paper dados and sage-green plush at Plas-y-Coed!"

Judith, as she spoke, looked up at the grim, lichen-shaded old structure, and made one step as though she were going into the house.

Oscar put himself in front of her.

“Don’t go in yet, Judith; there’s something else I want you to do for me. Not now, but by-and-by, when I give you a nudge. I have been speaking to my mother already on the matter, and later on, when I speak to Wolf, I shall get you to back me up in what I want. The idea has come into my head lately that my going in for Oxford is great nonsense after all. Don’t start in that absurd manner as though something had stung you. Supposing by great good-fortune I should manage to creep into college say in a year and a half’s time. I suppose I must stay there at least three years if I want to cut any sort of a figure. Well, there’s a good four and a half years gone smash, and all for nothing at all. I shall be twenty-four and

a half years old, and not have earned one penny for myself. Think of that!"

Judith tried to keep down her astonishment.

"There are many men," she said, "who have never all their lives long earned one penny for themselves."

"Ah, but then they step into fortunes ready made for them, lucky dogs! But just think, Judith, how late in life it would be to begin earning one's bread at four-and-twenty. It would take at least ten years to make any sort of income, no matter what I took up with. Why, I should be quite an old man before I should be able to settle down and marry!"

"Settle down and marry!" echoed Judith, in her surprise standing still in the middle of the path, surveying Oscar from head to foot.

Oscar's fair face flushed a deep red.

"Well, I suppose there's nothing very unreasonable in a man wanting to settle

down and marry some time or other?" he asked irritably.

"Some time or other, yes," said Judith, beginning to recover herself; "but your 'some time or other' ought to be such a long way ahead that it wouldn't be worth while thinking of it for—oh, let us say fifteen or twenty years to come! She broke off for a moment, then a sudden merry light shone in her eyes. "It's Theo!" she cried; "I'm positive it's Theo! Now don't get so red, Oscar, and you needn't cut down all those carnations so spitefully with that stick. I don't ask you to say whether I'm right or wrong, but I'm convinced it's Theo."

Oscar's face took a yet deeper shade.

"You're wrong, as usual, Miss Judith Wiseacre!" he cried. "Theo is a dear good child, as I've always said, but Theo is a regular tomboy, and it is not Theo!"

"Then it's Miss Leila," said Judith with great decision; "I'm positive I'm right

this time, and if you deny it ever so much I sha'n't believe you. Only tell me what she is like—do, there's a good fellow. Is she little, and brown, and sallow, like me?"

"She is not little, and brown, and sallow."


"Well, then, is she tall, and large, and fair, like Martha, who brings the milk every morning?"

"She is not in the least like Martha, the milkmaid."

"Then who and what is she like? Oh, dear, dear Oscar!" and here Judith laid her hand pleadingly on the young man's arm, "do—do describe her to me—or try, at any rate."

"Judith, God, in all His making, never made anything more beautiful than Leila Martin," answered Oscar gravely, almost solemnly. Then he shook himself free from Judith's hand and went straight into the house.

CHAPTER XII.

SCAR'S trepidation lest the Misses Martin should not be properly housed during their short visit, could scarcely be a matter for surprise to anyone acquainted with the normal condition of the unused sleeping apartments at the old Grange. A more desolate, forlorn, and shabby succession of rooms could scarcely be imagined. So at least thought Judith as—having first obtained Mrs. Reece's permission—she made the round of them with Bryce at her heels.

The keys creaked in the rusty locks one after the other; Bryce threw back each door with an air half-defiant,

half-contemptuous, as of one who would say: "No doubt you, with your modern fastidious ways, would decline to sleep in them, and yet better people than you have lain in those beds." She looked up in Judith's face as she surveyed the faded chintzes, the carpets absolutely tattered in parts, the dirt-begrimed walls and ceilings, ready to take up arms in defence of each piece of forlorn shabbiness.

But Judith made no remark whatsoever; she looked in silence at some ten or twelve bedrooms, going down odd-looking winding passages to get to them, and ascending odd-looking winding stairs. So Bryce essayed a remark which was intended to show she was ready for any attack upon her late master's domestic arrangements.

"Th' old squire," she said with a little grin on her old face, "was not fond of visitors after Madam Reece died."

"No," acquiesced Judith negatively.

"And Master Bernard was always away

in foreign parts, both before and after his father's death."

"Yes," acquiesced Judith affirmatively.

Bryce shrugged her shoulders, with her hand on the last lock.

"It's to be hoped the young ladies who are coming are not fond of smart rooms with muslin and ribbons decked about, and easy-chairs, and sofas, and foot-stools, and such like, for they won't get them here," she grumbled.

"Evidently," was Judith's brief reply. Then, seeing that Bryce had not yet unlocked this, the last uninspected room, she asked: "Is this a bedroom, Bryce—can I go in here?"

"It's the tapestry-room," answered Bryce, letting her voice fall a little. "You may go in if you like, Miss Judith; I would rather stay outside."

Judith went in. This was a larger room than any she had yet seen, though, like the others, its ceiling was low. Its four square walls were hung with tapestry,

whose subject and colour time, with damp, ruthless hand, had almost obliterated. Here and there from out a grey-brown background of cross-stitch loomed a russet-coloured Titanic face with that sardonic smile on its lips which only cross-stitch knows how to impart. Judith, by straining her eyes and imagination alike, could fancy she could trace the outline of gigantic tree-boughs and enormous chariot-wheels, and now and again a small, childish, cherub head. She longed to have the history of it all.

“Why don’t you come in and tell me all about this room, Bryce?” she called to the old woman, who remained obstinately on the other side of the threshold. Bryce shook her head.

“You’d best come out, Miss Judith; it’s the room where the old squire died, and”—this added in a low, reverential whisper—“as he lay dying he said to me, ‘Bryce,’ he said, ‘if ever anything troubles me after I’m gone, and I can

come back, this is where you may look to see me.' They were almost the last words he said, Miss Judith, as he lay dying on that bed."

Judith's eyes naturally turned towards the bed which stood at the far end, and in the darkest corner of the room. It was a massive piece of furniture, square, with four enormous pillars and heavy cornice of carved oak. It was hung with full, wide curtains of tapestry, which matched in greyness and grimness the other hangings of the room. They were closely drawn together, so that not a vestige of bed-covering or pillow was to be seen.

Judith had never before set eyes on a bedstead which presented so close a resemblance to a sarcophagus.

"Which way does this room look?" she asked, going towards the window, anxious for an excuse to throw back the half-closed shutters, so as to get a better view of the dreary antiquated

relics, which she felt sure must fill every corner.

“Let the windows be, Miss Judith,” cried Bryce; “you’ll only see the bleak-side of the mountains from there. Come out and let me lock the door again. It’s ill prying into dead men’s rooms.”

Judith’s answer was a loud exclamation of surprise.

“Why—why, what is this?” she cried in a tone of alarm, standing still and gazing at an object which at that minute caught her eye.

From where she stood in the dim light, it looked like a narrow veil of black crape or gauze hanging from the ceiling in front of and some inches below the high oaken mantelpiece. She made one step towards it, and then laughed outright. It was simply and literally a veil of black cobwebs, nothing more, spun by the generations of house-spiders who had carried on a peaceful existence there since

the old squire's death. Judith's merriment excited Bryce's wrath.

"Miss Judith," she said grimly, "it's ill to laugh where most people would weep. Come out of the room before something dreadful happens. If you raise your eyes a little higher you'll see something you won't laugh at, I'll be bound."

Judith did raise her eyes a little higher, till, in fact, they rested on the mantelpiece, upon which stood one single ornament—a huge clock of strange device in beaten brass and bronze. The design was that of a monument, and in place of inscription was the round figured face of the dial. Beside it lay an overturned bell, over which leaned a gaunt skeleton, hammer in hand, prepared to strike the hour. Beneath him, in quaint characters, was written the legend: "I wasted time, and now doth time waste me." Seen through the black veil of cobwebs, it certainly bore a grim and somewhat spectral appearance.

Judith felt suddenly chilled.

"You are right, Bryce," she said; "laughter is as much out of place here as it would be in a church."

She turned to leave the room as she spoke, but as she neared the door, her foot catching in a hole in the carpet, she fell forward nearly on to her face, barely recovering her balance.

The old flooring creaked, and there seemed to come the faint vibrating sound of the bell, as of the old clock striking.

"Oh, Miss Judith, Miss Judith!" cried Bryce, her face white, her hands quaking, "what have you done? Don't you know there's ill luck in store for them who set the dead man's clock going? Come out, come out!" and she clutched at Judith's wrist, literally dragged her out of the room, shutting and locking the door behind her.

Judith felt a little disturbed with her morning's adventure. She loved old-world stories and mysteries as she loved her

dreams, the scent of flowers, the memory of a song. But she loved them to be fresh, sweet, holy poems with the ring of some blessed truth in them, not shadowed, as the traditions of this house appeared to be, with a grim weirdness that suggested evil and pain. She told the story of the tapestry-room to Mrs. Reece, as they sat together in the heat of the afternoon under the shadow of the slouching yews.

"I did not know there was such a room in the house," said Mrs. Reece; then she in turn handed on the story to Wolf, who was coming slowly along their path at this moment, evidently bent on passing them if he could do so without positive discourtesy.

He listened with a deep attention, standing silent and motionless in front of them as they sat, the bright August sun lighting up a very wan, haggard face under a broad beaver-hat. He made no reply to his mother's remark that the

room ought to be opened and cleaned, and the ghosts turned out of it.

“Did you look at the other rooms?” he asked, turning to Judith. “Is it possible, do you think, to make them fit for two young ladies in a few days’ time? You know better than I do what is a young lady’s ideal in the way of a bedroom.”

Judith knew what her ideal of a bedroom was clearly enough, and the bedrooms at Villa Rosa exactly expressed it. She answered frankly and to the point:

“I don’t think they could be made fit for any one to sleep in in a few days’ time, unless you had an upholsterer down from London—”

She stopped abruptly, recollecting all in a moment Wolf’s evident disinclination to spend money on the house, and the large outlay the having an upholsterer from London might involve.

Wolf seemed to read her hesitation.

"That would mean more money than I am prepared to spend," he said with brusque decision. "I must think it over, and see what can be done."

A sudden idea struck Judith.

"Why not let the girls have my room? I dare say they won't mind sleeping together," she exclaimed. "My room has been made so nice and comfortable, I'm sure they would like it. I could sleep in any of the other rooms without any fuss of doing up. Except, perhaps in the tapestry-room."

The last sentence was added *sotto voce*, and as though she were somewhat ashamed of the admission.

A sudden idea seemed to strike Wolf also.

"They shall have my room," he said; "it can easily be arranged to suit them. Will you speak to Bryce, mother, about it? Tell her also, please, that I will meantime go into the tapestry-room. I don't want it turned out, and that sort of thing, just opened and aired—nothing more."

Judith gazed at him round-eyed and silent. Mrs. Reece found a voice and poured forth a volley of objections.

“Of course I don’t believe in haunted rooms and rubbish of that sort,” she cried, “but the room must be damp and close, and ought to have a month’s airing at least before it’s slept in. You will catch your death some day with your mad freaks.”

But Wolf was not to be lightly turned from his purpose, and though Bryce raised such a storm of objections and forebodings that Mrs. Reece’s were by comparison with them “as moonlight unto sunlight and as water unto wine,” the room was made ready for him, and a week later found him duly installed therein.



CHAPTER XIII.

IT was pleasant to think that the walls of the old Grange were so soon to throw back the echo of young, merry voices, the tread and spring of young, merry footsteps. Judith felt her heart go up at a bound at the thought of possible long walks in the early morning up the rough, misty, mountain-sides, of lazy, twilight talks in the dim, cooing wood with two girls of her own age, and—she hoped—possessing her own capacity for long country walks morning, noon, or night.

To say truth the silence and dreariness of the old Grange was beginning just now to make themselves felt to her. If

only dear Uncle Pierre, soft-voiced, always striving to give pleasure, always successful in his endeavour, could but have crossed the threshold, bringing with him the atmosphere of Villa Rosa, the atmosphere which dear Aunt Maggie had compounded of blithe order and decorous abandon for her own and everybody else's delectation, what a magical change would have been wrought at Plas-y-Coed!

Judith's heart in those days was always going back aching and quaking to the happy old time at Villa Rosa. None who knew this girl slightly as did these new friends at Plas-y-Coed, and noted her quiet, even walk through the monotony of life there, her intense delight in simple country pleasures, her unfeigned interest in the most commonplace affairs of a most commonplace world, could have guessed of what strong, deep passions she was capable. Wolf, on the day of her arrival, had described her to his mother as looking pale and wan. "Possibly," he had suggested,

“from her long, tiring journey.” He did not know—how could he?—that the paleness and wanness were the result of that desperate rebellion, that most futile of all battles into which the youngest and least skilled in warfare are most prone to plunge—a battle against the laws of God which wrench from our clinging grasp our nearest and dearest before we have learnt to walk without them.

Judith had inherited, with other English traits, that thorough-going English habit of shutting the door upon everything in the shape of strong, deep feeling. Her passionate, loving heart she could not get rid of—there it was, and there it must be; but no one, however prying, should know it was there. Her long years of French training had not sufficed to root out this English instinct of hers. Many good things, no doubt, she had brought away with her from France, but not one good thing, essentially English, had she left behind.

“Why, you told me she was half a French girl,” exclaimed Theo Martin bluntly to Oscar, as she took a steady survey of Judith from head to foot; “but if it were not for her finikin boots, her big collars, and mounted-up hair, she would be as English as I am.”

It was said under Judith’s very eyelids. Oscar grew crimson and uncomfortable.

“Hush-sh! We are not at The Retreat now, remember,” he said, in a tone of remonstrance.

Judith laughed.

“And I am as English as you,” she said. “At Villa Rosa we spoke and read quite as much English as we do here at the Grange. We spoke French, just as they do Welsh here, only to the servants.”

Theo gave her opinion of everybody and everything about her with the same delightful frankness. She was a large, fair, bouncing girl of sixteen, with very short petticoats and very thick ankles. Her features were good, with the exception

of her mouth, which was wide and large, without being full-lipped. Her eyes—the best part of her face—were of a dark blue-grey, and were fringed with long black lashes.

Her glad, hearty ways won Judith's heart at once. Somehow she seemed the counterpart of Oscar in her blitheness, her boyishness, and thorough determination to take life pleasantly.

To the elder sister Judith did not feel so drawn, in spite of her rare beauty and grace of manner. Leila's was simply a perfect face, the complexion of a pure pallor, tinged with colour as delicate as the lining of a cameo-shell; the nose straight, with finely-cut nostrils; the mouth full, with coral-red lips. Her eyes were "deeply, darkly, gloriously blue," fringed, like Theo's, with long black lashes; her forehead low and wide; her eyebrows delicately pencilled; her hair, a dark chestnut-brown, fell in one long plait below her waist; her figure was tall

and stately, a little inclined to plumpness, perhaps, and her hands and feet were, perhaps, a little larger than she herself would have chosen; but, on the whole, a more glorious creature to look at never walked the earth.

Judith could have sat gazing at her hour after hour, as she would have gazed at a beautiful statue or picture, could the laws of courtesy have permitted it. By Leila's side she felt herself grow small, sallow, and insignificant. With the impress of this grand woman upon her eyes she went up to her own room, and surveyed herself from head to foot in the modern cheval-glass which had been placed there for her. She saw reflected in it a small, slight girl, with tiny hands and feet, a colourless complexion, small indeterminate features, dark hazel eyes—unripe hazel, be it noted—and brown hair, untinged with the faintest suspicion of gold. A lady's face it was, a pure, true, gentle face too, which knew well how to express

every shade of tender feeling, and which might, under strong pressure, express passion, poetry, tragedy all in one, but for all that not a beautiful face, not one that would have arrested a second glance from a passer-by—nor even a first had Leila Martin's shone beside it.

Judith almost laughed aloud, as she thought of the contrast. No wonder that poor Oscar, at his susceptible age, had fallen victim to such rich and rare attractions. Then there stole another thought into her heart, a thought that seemed to bring with it a twinge of some sort, slight as a needle-prick, yet as distinct. What would Wolf think of this dainty young beauty? Would his eyes be as veiled to her loveliness as they seemed to be to everything under heaven, lovely or unlovely alike; or would he succumb to her many charms as thoroughly and rapidly as Oscar had done?

Theo made very merry over Oscar's devotion to the fair Leila.

“He thinks he’s in love with her,” she said, throwing her nine-stone weight on Judith’s knees, and putting a heavy fat arm round her slender throat; “but, bless you, he isn’t. He’ll get out of it in a fortnight’s time, when another new pupil comes, and he sees Leila making eyes at him—so,” here Theo manœuvred with her own dark lashes, and gave a Leila-like glance from beneath them. “It’s the greatest fun in the world to see them”—*i.e.* the pupils—“all knocked over, one after the other, like nine-pins, and then have to pick themselves up again. Sometimes, however, it gets a little too strong to be funny, at least pa thinks so, and then he packs Leila off to Germany for a month or so, to a school where there are no masters. She’s always being sent off in that way. Came back only three weeks ago, and knocked Oscar over like winking. She asked him to cut the ‘Cornhill’ for her, and he did it on his knees by her side. I knew

it was all up with him then, and it was. Heavy, do you say? You feel crushed! Why, what a poor little sparrow you must be, not to be able to stand my light weight!"

Judith could only hope and trust that Oscar would get over his love-sickness as easily as Theo prognosticated. She feared greatly, however, that the malady had taken too strong a hold him to be lightly shaken off. At first it seemed to her laughable to see Oscar so deeply steeped in this midsummer madness, but later on, as the depth and intensity of his passion became manifest to her, it seemed to her far from laughable, only pathetic and terrible. She longed to warn him as an elder sister might, to go to him and say, "Look at this lovely woman as long as you will, gaze at her as you would at the glittering stars of heaven, or some glorious purple sunset, but for all that, never dream of winning her. The stars of heaven, or the sun-

set sky itself, may be yours before she will."

But Judith's attention was before long to be drawn from Oscar and his headlong, eager adoration to another quarter.

At the third meal at which they had all assembled after the arrival of these young ladies, it was forced upon her notice that Wolf was awakening to the fact that an extremely beautiful young woman was seated at table with him. It was luncheon, which, with Theo and Oscar seated side by side, threatened to be a distinctly lively, not to say uproarious meal.

Theo had begun well by collecting every spoon within reach—salt, table, dessert spoons, and making a packet of them, had presented them to Oscar.

"I know it's sending coals to Newcastle, but no doubt you'll have continued use for them," she had said saucily.

"That's one to you, Miss Theo," Oscar had answered, adjusting a tablespoon in

his buttonhole; "but I'm much obliged to you all the same, and I'll pay you back with compound interest at the earliest opportunity."

"What is it—what is it?" asked Mrs. Reece, hearing the clatter of the silver, and wondering what it meant.

"We are giving sweets to the sweet, and spoons to the spoony," began the irrepressible Theo.

"Thistles to the foolish, a long rope to those who want to hang themselves," continued Oscar.

Judith looking up from her plate of salad at this moment, to see what effect this flow of young folly had upon Wolf, was surprised to find his eyes fixed not upon these noisy ones, but on the calmly sedate Leila, who was seated sideways to him and half-way down the table. It was a gaze half of wonder, half of admiration, such as she had never seen on his face before, and which seemed to her fancy to say: "Why did no one tell me

what a beautiful creature you are? Why have I been left to find it out for myself?"

Psychologists, in these days, tell us many things formerly supposed to be beyond their ken, but they have never yet been able to explain the magnetic power of a beautiful face. Men and women will disagree in their ideals of beauty—will deny its existence where it really is, and put forth claims for it where it is not; but let a beautiful man or woman enter the room, and every eye, consciously or unconsciously, willingly or unwillingly, will pay the homage due to the face so fair to look upon.

Wolf's eyes had seemed to Judith hitherto veiled to anything and everything that went on around him, a beautiful woman comes and sits down at table with him, and lo! he gazes and gazes as though he had never seen a woman's face before.

Leila bore his steadfast look tranquilly enough, keeping her full white lids down-

cast to the damask tablecloth. For one thing, she was accustomed to have men's eyes fixed on her; for another thing, she rather liked it than otherwise. She made a rule never to interrupt a gaze of that sort; she liked men, as it were, to look their utmost, and to take a full catalogue of her many perfections. It made them more conscious of her power, and better able to appreciate her smiles and favours when she chose to distribute them. So Wolf looked and looked at her from one side, and Oscar looked and looked at her from the other, and this young woman, fully conscious that two pairs of eyes were fixed upon her, bore the four-fold gaze with the serenity of a queen of beauty gathering in her tribute-money from her subjects and captives.

At last, when she considered that Wolf's eyes had almost drunk their fill—she did not wish them to be surfeited, be it noted—she lifted her eyelids, and said in that slow, low tone she generally affected:

"I am charmed with your home, Mr. Reece. The country is beyond anything lovely. I should so like one afternoon to make that little excursion to Llanrhaiadr Oscar was speaking about."

"You shall make it this afternoon if you like," answered Wolf, rising promptly from his chair to give the order that the old greys should at once be made ready for action.

Needle-prick number two in Judith's heart. Whence it came or wherefore she would have found it difficult to explain, but there it was unmistakably. Sharp, sudden, in and out, bringing no blood this time, just the merest beginning of a scratch, but, nevertheless, a suggestion of a possible wound in the days to come, deeper, wider, more difficult to heal.



CHAPTER XIV.

NOW you mean to entertain these young ladies for ten days at a stretch," grumbled Mrs. Reece, "is more than I can imagine. After you have shown them the church, the mountains (from the bottom), the woods, the waterfall, you'll simply be at your wits' ends how to get through the days. My dears, I think it would have been far wiser for you all to have gone in a body and stayed at their home, and done the London sights at the same time, than have had them down here where there is nothing to see and no one to speak to."

"Oh, Wolf has taken the matter into his own hands," Oscar grumbled back in

return, "and, so far as I can see, is providing ample amusement for them—for one of them, at any rate."

"What do you mean?" asked Mrs. Reece briskly. "Are you going to tell me that Wolf has fallen in love with one of these young ladies at first sight?"

"Can't say, I'm sure. I only know that he is making himself deucedly agreeable to them, and instead of shutting himself up in the library writing sermons all day long, he is either walking with them about the woods or taking them long, dusty drives to some outlandish place or other."

"Where is Judith? Judith, are you in the room?" called the old lady. "Come, you always speak the truth; you can't help it. Tell me, do you think Wolf has fallen in love at last? With the soft-voiced young lady of course it must be, for the little hoyden has not yet learnt how to attract men, whatever she may do for the women."

Judith looked up a little nervously from her book.

"I cannot tell—I do not know," she answered hesitatingly. "You see, I know so little about falling in love, it has never happened to come in my way."

"Anyone could see that," said Oscar, speaking as he so often did the first thing that came uppermost, words that he would be safe to unsay in ten minutes' time. "I am sure you are born to be an old maid. Not one of those nasty, sour old cats who do everything in their power to make people miserable, but one of those sweet, darling little creatures who never have any love-affairs of their own, and throw themselves heart and soul into the love-making of other people."

Judith, with eyes bent once more on her book, saw the lines describe all sorts of curious curves and zig-zags.

Never to have any love-affairs of her own! It was a hard sentence to pass on a girl not yet twenty.

"My dear," said Mrs. Reece in a dry, quiet tone, "a young lady of Judith's attractions, and with her large fortune, is not likely to lack lovers."

"Oh, I forgot all about her large fortune," said Oscar, paying unintentionally a compliment that would have done credit to a Chesterfield. "You see she makes us forget it. She never gives herself any airs over it. Ah, there they go again! Off for another walk, I suppose;" this, as the shadows of Leila and Wolf fell athwart the windows, and then followed their owners adown the weedy drive towards the gate.

Later on, when Mrs. Reece had left the room, Oscar grumbled out his sorrows to Judith in a yet stronger strain.

"It's a confounded shame, Judith—that's what it is," he said, going to the window and resting his elbows on the sill. "Why can't he leave her alone? Why does he want her all to himself, morning, noon, and night? What busi-

ness has he to steal her from me, I should like to know?"

"Steal her from you! Oh, Oscar!" protested Judith, trying to convince herself as much as the boy-lover that Wolf's attentions to Leila involved no covert idea of robbery. "Why, they are only taking a stroll together. I don't suppose they are more than half-a-dozen yards from the garden-gate."

"And what does he want to stroll with her for if he isn't in love with her? And why does he sit and stare at her in the way he does if he doesn't mean anything?"

Judith remained silent. Oscar went on:

"And what did he mean by taking her off to Llanrhaiadr the other day all by themselves?"

"All by themselves! Why, Oscar, you went also!"

"Yes, but I had to stay with the horses while he went into the church to show

her the brasses and monuments. Why couldn't he have let me have done it?"

"But, Oscar, you most likely couldn't have acted cicerone as Wolf did. It strikes me if you had taken her into the church you would simply have done as you did when you took me—nodded pleasantly to the monuments, and said: 'Now there they all are, choose for yourself which you like best.'"

"And what if I had!" said Oscar almost fiercely. "Does she care two straws for monuments or brasses, or anything of that sort? I tell you she cares no more for them than—than she does for me, and she couldn't well care less for anything under the sun!"

His fierceness was rapidly blazing itself out. There was an undernote of pain now in his tone which cut Judith to the heart. She longed to lift up a warning voice.

"My poor Oscar," she said, going over to his side and laying her hand upon

his arm, "if you are so positive she does not care for you, why don't you try to get the thought of her out of your heart? Why go on loving her in the way you do when you know you haven't the least chance in the world of winning her?"

"Why—why!" reiterated Oscar, turning round and facing Judith with renewed fierceness; "why do you love the stars, the sun, the flowers—everything that is bright and beautiful in the world? They don't care a brass farthing for you, do they?"

"Possibly not, Oscar; at any rate, they do me no harm. But if the sun suddenly took it into his head to smite me with brain-fever, or the flowers exhaled poison instead of fragrance—well, I should, to say the least, keep out of their way."

"Would you?" doubted Oscar, giving her one long, searching look, which brought to and then banished from her

face the quick red blood. "I very much doubt if you'd do anything of the kind. It strikes me, Judith, when once you fall in love, it will be something more than ankle-deep. Headforemost, neck-or-nothing, you'll go, and no matter what sort the fellow may turn out, you'll stick to him like grim death itself. Wait till your own time comes, Judith."

Judith's hand fell to her side. She made one irresolute step as though to leave the room, came back again, seemed to be gathering her courage together, and a little falteringly touched him lightly on the shoulder.

"Oscar," she said in the lowest of low tones, "if it be really as you think—I mean, supposing Wolf truly loves this girl as you imagine—you will not begrudge him his happiness, will you?"

It was said hesitatingly, lovingly, pleadingly. Oscar's face grew very white. It was at least a minute before he answered, and then his words came thick and slow.

"No, Judith, I won't begrudge him his happiness. I'll stand out of his way; I promise you that. Wolf deserves to be happy—Heaven knows, he has done more than ever I have towards earning happiness."

There was a long pause. It was a scorchingly hot August morning; from outside there came the faint scent of honeysuckle and jasmine, and the deep, droning sound of a big humming-bee.

"Thank you, Oscar," said Judith softly, speaking as though he had granted her a personal favour.

"Yes," Oscar went on, as though he had not heard her; "Wolf has had misery and discomfort enough in his time. Compared with his, my life has been all sunshine. He bore the brunt of all our poverty and troubles in London, working like a galley-slave for the poor people all the time. Judith, did I ever tell you what he did in the fever that raged five years ago, when my father died, when the sick nurses even

refused to come and nurse the people, and the undertakers had to be paid double to bury them? Why, he sold every mortal thing he could call his own—his books, his watch, some jewellery that had been left him in a will; sent away my mother and me into the country, and literally lived with the poor people himself. Aye; ate, drank, slept with them; prayed with them; nursed them night and day; was one of them till the fever came to an end, and they got their courage back.”

Oscar said all this slowly, dwelling on his words as though by thus recounting one by one his brother's good deeds, he were dealing so many successive blows to his own jealous passion.

Judith listened, holding in her breath as one does in the presence of some grand and beautiful thing.

This was the man whom she had believed to be laden with a guilty secret!

Oscar went on, half to himself, half to Judith:

“No, I’m not ungrateful. I don’t forget how he starved and stinted himself to give me proper clothes and schooling. Begrudge him his happiness! No. I would double it if I could; but, great Heavens, at what a cost!” And here the poor lad bowed his head on the window-ledge and burst into tears.

Judith put her small arm round his broad shoulders, and did her best to comfort him.

“I know what a fool I am; let me alone in my folly, Judith,” he said savagely. “But sometimes I feel as though our coming here to The Grange had brought a curse upon us. Oh, we were all much happier in our poverty in London.”

“The happy times will come back, Oscar; I feel sure they will come back!”

“Will they? I don’t feel so sure. Oh, what fools we all were to rejoice as we did when the news of our good fortune came! How bright and happy Wolf seemed! Why, he really laughed in those days. Then, when we got here, everything seemed to change

all of a sudden, like a sun going down in mid-day. He dismissed all the work-people he had engaged, reduced the servants by one half, and settled down into the gloomy, miserable man he is now. It seemed as though a curse fell upon him as he crossed the threshold of the house. At the very gates he met a child singing, he bade 'God bless her,' gave her the last shilling he had in his pocket, and told her to go and make some one happy with it, entered this house, went up into his room, read his letters, and came downstairs a changed being. Judith, it's my belief there's something wrong about this place—something evil has been done here, and we, who know nothing about it, are paying the penalty for it."

There came a flutter and scramble along the gravel-path at this moment, and Theo, with one of Oscar's wideawakes on her head, made her appearance outside. Her dress was dusty and disarranged, here and there a bramble clung to it.

Judith envied Oscar the facility with

which he smoothed out the muscles of his face, and effaced all signs of deep feeling.

“Well,” said Theo, standing in the midst of a flower-bed, and leaning in at the window so that her nose almost touched Oscar’s, “you are a pair of duffers and no mistake, not to be out of doors this glorious morning. I’ve been bird-nesting up among the yews; have I brought back a church-yardy smell with me?”

“Bird-nesting in August! I like that?” said Oscar contemptuously.

“And I like it, too!” retorted Theo. “Don’t you see, Mr. Wiseacre, one must have an object in life before one can put forth one’s best energies. I must have an object before I can make up my mind to climb a tree even. I say to myself, ‘I’ll get as high as that nest, and put a stone in it,’ and I do—that’s all. Good gracious, Judith, how dismal you look! Have you been crying? What’s the matter?”

“Judith has been reading the lives

of the saints, about St. Francis or one of the mfrizzling, and it has distressed her," answered Oscar readily.

"Well, why shouldn't saints frizzle if they like it? I'm sure I feel more than half-grilled at the present moment with this scorching sun pouring down. I say, Oscar, can't you open your window a little higher? I'm sure I could scramble in if you'll stand back."

And while Theo made her entry through the window, Judith made her exit through the door, and escaped to her own room for a little quiet.

Her head was hot and aching. She threw open wide her window. "Fresh air brings fresh thought," Aunt Maggie had been wont to say, and Judith had caught from her the love of open windows, and long breezy walks. She leaned out, looking mountain-wards, and wondering over many things, losing herself in the past history and present love-stories of Oscar and Wolf, when suddenly there came a

gentle tapping at her door, and in response to her "Come in," much to her surprise Leila entered the room.

She had still her hat on, as though she had just come in from her walk.

"May I come in?" she asked, standing well in the middle of the room. "I know you have a cheval-glass here; there isn't one in my room, and I haven't looked at myself properly since I left home. I'm not sure about the way this dust-cloak hangs at the back."

As she spoke she advanced towards the glass, stood for one moment looking at her full face, then, half-twisting her neck, tried to get a survey of the back plaits of her robe and long-flowing cloak.

"Certainly," was Judith's brief reply; then accusing herself of lack of courtesy, she added, "Can I help you at all?" and endeavoured to adjust the side-screws of the glass, so as to give Leila a better view of herself.

A lovely picture that looking-glass

framed, full of lights and shadows, sharp contrasts and sweet harmonies. A young woman, gloriously, sensuously beautiful; a goddess in her face, and an empress in her gait; a pale dark face, a little in the shadows behind, whose only loveliness lay in fulness of expression and subtle suggestions of spirituality.

Judith felt the contrast between herself and this young beauty in all its keenness, yet she looked and looked into the mirror as though the sight were a pleasant one to her. "No wonder," she thought, "that men should go mad over her," and yet somehow she had fancied this man was not one to be dazzled with a woman's face:

Leila also seemed to take a pleasure in surveying this lifelike picture.

"I wish," she said after a long, steady look, "I had a sister like you, just your age and size, and everything; it would be so nice going out together."

"Ah, nice for the one who got the benefit of the contrast, not for the other,"

said Judith bluntly, yet without the faintest stirring of that envy in her heart which only narrow intellects can harbour.

"You see," Leila went on, "Theo is not the most companionable person in the world to begin with, and her appearance, though not so bad, if she would study it and bring out its best points, is not one to set mine off to advantage, don't you know."

The frank selfishness of this young woman, could it have been collected and parcelled out, would have sufficed to arm and protect a whole battalion of beauties in their first season.

"Theo is a very kind, good-natured girl, and will possibly win love where others only win admiration," was Judith's significant reply.

"I hope she will, I am sure, for her own sake, since she has no chance of getting anything else," said Leila calmly; "but I hope it won't be love and penury. I always have an idea, somehow, that Theo

will be a little reckless in her love-affairs. However, it will be no business of mine."

"No business of hers," thought Judith. "Only two sisters, and the love-making of one to be of no concern to the other!" However, she did not speak her thoughts. As well, she instinctively felt, might she argue with a soulless marble statue, as with this exquisitely wrought piece of humanity, on whose exterior nature had been so lavish of her pains that she had left herself no time to bestow the crowning gift of a tender human heart.

Leila finished her survey, walking a little backward from the glass to get a farewell look.

"I wouldn't have put this thing on, only I thought Mr. Reece was going to drive me this morning. In the oddest manner possible, at the last moment, he altered his mind and proposed a walk. Do you think he's mad, or going mad?"

It was all said in the most even, unemotional of voices, just as if she were saying :

"Do you think he has a long nose, or is going to grow a moustache?"

Judith shivered. This was putting into plain words a dread which had more than once made itself felt in her heart. Again and again had she wrestled with the terrible suspicion. She did not mean to succumb to it now on the mere suggestion of this unsympathetic young person.

"No, I do not think so—I will not think so. What can make you have such a terrible idea in your mind? You ought to think twice before you say such dreadful things," she answered with a vehemence that made Leila lift her white lids a good quarter-inch higher than they generally went, and her pencilled eyebrows correspondingly.

"I was not aware you took such a strong interest in the matter. I'm sure I beg your pardon," she said, with a little, meaning smile that was excessively disagreeable, and tended to ruffle Judith still more.

“How would it be possible not to take an interest in such a matter?” she asked vehemently. “Think, if it were true, what it would be to his mother and to his brother. Why, all the happiness would be gone out of their lives for ever.”

“I suppose they would feel it ; it would make them talked about a good deal. But why does he act so strangely—sit and stare at one? Now, I am accustomed to be stared at,” she added naïvely enough, “but not like that. It doesn’t altogether seem admiration.”

“Would it be possible to look at you without admiration?” asked Judith frankly, anxious to lead the talk away from a subject that chilled and frightened her.

“I suppose it would not,” said Leila, taking the compliment as a matter of course, and giving one more look at the graceful reflection which still confronted her. “But one thing I must say. If Mr. Reece is not mad, he is the oddest specimen of sanity I ever saw. Why, he actu-

ally told me, not half an hour ago, that his first and only thought in life was his mother and brother. Now, for a man at his age to make such a statement is—well, to say the least, highly eccentric. Hark! there is the luncheon-bell. Thank you for letting me come in. I must go now.”

Judith, left alone, came to the unavoidable conclusion that, whatever might be the infatuation of Wolf or Oscar for the beautiful Leila, not the faintest breath of passion stirred her heart for either the one or the other.



CHAPTER XV.

CERTAINLY, judged by the rules which ordinarily govern men's actions, Wolf's conduct at this time seemed strangely erratic and incomprehensible, destitute of motive, and following no precedent. His kith and kin had grown accustomed to the transformation of the earnest, hard-working clergyman into the taciturn, indifferent, unoccupied dreamer, had accepted the change, and almost ceased to wonder at it; then lo! suddenly another change had set in, gloom and taciturnity were once more laid on one side, something of cheerfulness (a wry, wintry sort of thing) took possession of him. Meals, that had been of late eaten in all but silence, were

enlivened by an interchange of words, if not of ideas. The library, which had been his immediate refuge after every gloomy breakfast or dinner, saw nothing of him ; it was, in fact, thrown open to the use of the household generally, and a housemaid had been allowed to enter and remove some of the overlaying dust.

Judith, who remembered the stern, hard look of the man, and the way in which he had handed her out of this sanctum sanctorum on the one occasion on which she had dared to penetrate its mysteries, could only hold in her breath and wonder as she saw broom and brush doing their much-needed work.

Mrs. Reece seemed to feel that changes were rife in the air, though she could scarcely realise their nature and extent.

“It seems to me, my dear,” she said to Judith one day as the young girl came into the morning-room to read to her as usual after breakfast, “that Oscar talks less than he ever did in his life, and Wolf more—

more, at any rate, than he has for the past three or four months. And it also strikes me that he is showing this Miss Leila Martin a great deal of attention; they leave the room together, and I hear them constantly talking in the garden together. Now, my dear, isn't it so?"

Judith, driven into a corner, was forced to admit that Wolf was showing Miss Martin a great deal of attention.

"Well, my dear," the old lady went on, "she's not exactly the one I should have chosen for Wolf had I been consulted on the matter, and I must say I am a little surprised at his choice. Of course, I'm bound to take what you all say for granted, that she is a very beautiful girl, but I did not imagine that Wolf was one to be fascinated by mere beauty. Now tell me honestly, did you, my dear?"

Judith, driven into another corner, was forced to admit that she had not thought Wolf was one to be fascinated by mere beauty.

“Poor boy!” the garrulous old lady went on. “I suppose it’s just this: he has been thrown so little into the society of young ladies, that he falls a victim to the first one who makes a dead set at him. Of course she did make a dead set at him?” this interrogatively.

Judith, however, had no mind to be driven into a third corner. She took up her book hastily.

“I have brought down a poem to read to-day,” she said. “I hope you will like it. I picked it up in London at the railway-station while I was waiting for my train.”

“My dear,” answered Mrs. Reece, “I fear I have lost my taste for poetry, just as I have for tarts and jellies, which young people can eat and enjoy, and never get enough of. But never mind, you may read it to me. If it doesn’t interest me it won’t disturb my thoughts, and, in any case, I like to hear your soft, clear voice. It sounds so fresh and young, it brings back young thoughts to me. Read on.”

Judith read on.

The poem was a simple one, told by one who had done no great thing in poetic art, save this; and this, though simple, was a great poem. A poem that might have enabled the author to ride straight to fame and fortune had it chanced to tickle the "one long ear" of that "famous beast," the British reading public. However, it had not succeeded in performing this notable office, so it remained the first and last poem the writer ever achieved, or at any rate ever published.

It told in language, destitute alike of veneer or any poetic artifice, "the story of a broken life."

The form of the poem was biographic, and commenced at the period when the man, whose history was recorded, and who had led a dissipated, evil life in foreign lands, was seized with a sudden penitence, and resolved to retrace his whole life, step by step, repairing the evil he had wrought,

and making amends to every soul he had injured.

“A building that had been overthrown,” he argued with himself, “could be rebuilt exactly in its original form if people gave but the patience, the time, the thought to the work.” Well, with infinite patience, and time, and thought, he would rebuild his ruined life, doing, one by one, exactly those things which he ought to have done but had neglected, and undoing every wrong he had ever done to his fellow-men.

In pursuance of this idea, he collected together all the money he had at command, and travelled back to his native village over the exact track he had followed on quitting it.

His first attempt at reparation was to try and bring two lovers together whom he had separated. He found, however, that the man had turned soldier, and had fallen in battle; the girl had married a man for whom she had no love, and who treated her harshly and cruelly.

His second attempt at reparation was to seek out a young brother whom he had thrown upon the world, because his dependence was a trouble and an impediment to him. The young brother, in penury and desperation, had joined the Paris Communists, and had been last seen throwing petroleum on the walls of the Tuileries.

With a sinking heart the man resolved he would stop no more on his road, but get back to his native village as quickly as possible, lest even there Fate might have forestalled him.

He will, he thinks, shower his gold on his aged father and mother, marry the girl who loved him, and who nearly broke her heart when he left her to roam the world over.

He arrives at his village late in the summer twilight. Meeting an old villager in the streets, he asks him of his father, mother, and former sweetheart. For all answer, the old villager leads him to the churchyard, and shows him three graves

side by side. The man stands horror-stricken looking down on them. Then he bursts into one passionate appeal to Heaven. Why were things thus ordained? Why was not the remaking of a life as easy as its unmaking? Why could one pull to pieces, yet never be able to put together again? Why could one without an effort, with a wave of the hand, or the breath of a moment, undo a whole structure of good, and yet with hard toil and infinite endeavour never be able to build it up again?—Why? Why?

And the old man standing by his side with bowed head and folded hands, echoed the question—Why? Why?

There the poem ended.

Judith's voice trembled a little as she said the concluding "Why?" She had read the poem at the London railway-station while she waited for her train; then it had seemed to her a simple, touching story, nothing more.

Somehow, read now, in the gloom and seclusion of the Grange, it seemed to sound an undertone of pain and pathos so deep as to be almost prophetic.

"Thank you, my dear," said Mrs. Reece briskly, sounding her own cheery note above every other. "It's a pretty story. I lost part of it here and there, through counting my stitches; but I don't suppose it mattered much; in poetry, you know, there is always a great deal one might leave out and never miss. As I was saying, it's a pretty story, but it seems to me it was a great pity the young man didn't think of going back to his friends a year or two sooner, then he wouldn't have had to stand at their graves, and ask so many Whys."

"The man was a selfish hound," said another voice—a masculine one; and Judith, looking up, saw Wolf and Leila Martin standing at the opened window. "We have been listening here for the last five minutes," he explained. "I

repeat, the man was a selfish hound, and his 'Why? why?' nothing more than the whine of a whipped cur. He sinned for himself (not for others), and he gets the punishment in himself, in his own soul. Depend upon it, his people were much better off without him."

"No, no, no, my dear," interrupted Mrs. Reece, buckling to for an argument; "that's too hard a thing to say. No parents can be better off without their children, no matter what those children may be, or may do. Depend upon it, this poor father and mother broke their hearts fretting for his return."

"Better break their own hearts than have them broken for them," said Wolf with a laugh that was not pleasant to hear. "They would have had an equivalent for their breaking hearts, depend upon it, if he had stayed in his home and brought shame and dishonour within their doors. No, I repeat," and here his voice grew loud and defiant, "if a man

brings disgrace upon his kith and kin, the kindest thing he can do is to take himself and his disgrace as far away from the old roof-tree as possible."

Judith could keep silence no longer.

"I should call that the most cowardly not the kindest thing he could do," she said, speaking up bravely. "Surely it would be far nobler to stand in one's own place, face the evil one has done, and endeavour to repair it, than to run away and hide oneself for safety round a corner."

"Two questions, Miss Wynne," said Wolf, turning his deep-set eyes on her. "Might not the running away under certain conditions, require more courage than the standing in one's own place? And, must the running away of necessity be dictated by selfish motives? Might it not be done from suggestions of Christian charity and regard for the welfare of others?"

He threw a depth of meaning into his question which startled her.

It was positively a relief to hear Leila Martin's voice chime in at this moment with the calmly matter-of-fact question :

"But why read such melancholy stories at all? There are so many pretty, light poems now to be had. I'm sure every month in the magazines one sees such interesting verses—nice things that would set delightfully to music."

"Exactly," said Wolf with the slightest touch of sarcasm in his tone ; "why should we listen to anything horrible and distressing, when life is so evidently intended to be easy, and pleasant, and enjoyable?"

"That's just what I meant," agreed Leila, whose ear was not quick to detect subtle shades of voice or speech. "Life, of course, was given us to enjoy ; why should we make ourselves miserable with reading about other people's troubles that we have no power to prevent? It's always marvellous to me how people can take up a newspaper, and deliberately

set themselves to read all the horrible things that go on in the world."

"Ah," interrupted Mrs. Reece. "We used to hear enough of horrors in the old days, didn't we, Wolf? At one time I remember an epidemic of horrors seemed to set in, one thing followed the other so rapidly. Well, we were used to it then, I suppose, and we did our best under it, but I must say I shouldn't like to have to go through it all again. Poor people are very worrying; they like to tell their horrible stories over and over again, for the pleasure of seeing your flesh creep, I suppose. No, I shouldn't like those old days to come back again."

"Wouldn't you, mother?" asked Wolf in an earnest, startled tone, as though some sudden idea had occurred to him. "Would you not for any consideration go through all those old days of poverty and hardship, with the perpetual sense of squalor and misery about one, and the perpetual necessity for hopeless, hard work?"

Oscar, coming into the room at this moment, heard the question.

“Well, my dear,” answered Mrs. Reece, “that is rather a difficult question to answer. I won’t say I wouldn’t for any consideration go back to the old days, but I am really and truly thankful no such necessity exists. I verily believe six weeks of the East of London would send me to my grave after this peaceful, happy life and pure country air. And of the two, I honestly think the grave would be the better place for an old body like me.”

A change swept over Wolf’s face; the eager earnestness died out of it. He turned to Oscar.

“What do you say?” he asked; “do you think the grave would be a better place than the East End of London in the height or depth of its wretchedness?”

Oscar hesitated a moment. He looked at Judith, remembering his words of the previous day in praise of their old life.

He had meant them as he said them. Seen from a distance, those old days might "loom into the perfect star," but let them come but by half an inch nearer, and they would show as the miserable prison-house they in reality were.

"I don't know about the grave," he answered slowly, "one doesn't care about ending life before it is well begun, but I know this—that sooner than go back to the old, hard-working, poverty-stricken life, I would go and break stones in the quarry on the other side of those mountains."

Wolf turned away from the window without another word.

Leila looked at Judith and gave a little shrug of her shoulders, which was intended to say: "Did I not tell you he was on the verge of madness? Would anyone in possession of all his faculties walk away in that abrupt fashion when he might have had the benefit of my society for another half-hour before luncheon?"

CHAPTER XVI.

WOLF still retained possession of Judith's bloodstone, and wore it on the little finger of his left hand. Judith would have liked to ask for its return, but somehow could never find the opportunity. There had seemed to grow up between them of late a something of chilliness and reserve which she did not care to attempt to bridge over. Once or twice, it is true, she had caught his eyes fixed upon her with the same earnest, appealing look she had surprised in them in the first days of their acquaintance, but they as often as not wandered from her face to Leila's, and there they would rest, evi-

dently without the smallest compunction, for five or ten minutes at a time.

“He is putting us side by side, and measuring the distance between us,” thought Judith a little bitterly. This was exactly what he was doing, although not precisely in the manner nor with the result she imagined.

Wolf’s diamond-ring she had been compelled to put on one side; it was too large for any one of her fingers, and she was afraid of losing it. She let it lie in her drawer till she should have the opportunity of returning it, and asking for her own. Wolf did not seem to notice its absence from her finger, or at any rate made no remark upon the matter. Bryce did, however, with a scowl and a frown—those keen old eyes of hers saw a great deal more than people thought.

“Have you lost it—the master’s ring, I mean?” she asked on the first morning that Judith made her appearance without it.

“No,” answered Judith; “it was too large, that was all, and would keep slipping off my finger.”

Bryce shook her head, and went away grumbling, the only words which reached Judith’s ear, as her footsteps died away in the distance, being, “It’s ill giving a slipping ring,” or something of the sort.

Poor old Bryce seemed always frowning and scowling in those days; she went about the house with a perpetual sense of the approach of some direful calamity weighing her down. The episode of the bloodstone-ring had been bad enough, but the unlocking and occupying of the tapestry-room was as much beyond that as the blue mountains that looked down on them were beyond the dark wood. To her fancy this room was as sacred as the consecrated church in the vale of Llanrhaiadr, or the vault in its churchyard, where lay some generations of the Reece family.

None but Master Bernard, or Master

Bernard's son, should have dared to give the order for the unlocking and occupying of this room; failing these, it should have been kept sacred to the memory of the old squire, who, with dim, fixing eyes, had said to her :

“Bryce, if ever anything troubles me, and I can come back to you, look for me here.”

Did “the master”—in this way she invariably spoke and thought of Wolf—“really wish to bring the old squire's ghost from the grave that he dared the traditions of the house in this way? Well, those who lived the longest would see the most, but it was ill to put the axe to the root of one's own tree,” and so forth—and so forth.

Wolf's defiance of the family traditions set her mind ruminating on other possibilities. Now that all known precedent was being so ruthlessly set on one side, what might not be her own fate in the years to come?

She confronted Wolf one day in one of the narrow corridors, barring his progress with a peremptory question.

"I'm wanting to know," she said in her old, creaking voice, "where you mean to bury me? Now all the Bryces have for generations been laid just behind the Reece vault in graves six feet deep do you see? and there's room left for one more—is that where you mean me to lie?"

Wolf stared at her vacantly. It was full a minute and a half before her meaning dawned upon him.

"My good soul," he said at length, "arrange for your own burying where, when, and how you please. Put it all down in your will, and then no one will make any mistake on the matter, or arrange it all with the rector of Llanrhaiadr, if that will suit you better."

The old body's question brought back to his memory sundry similar matters he had arranged for the poor people during his East London ministrations.

By a coincidence the rector of Llanrhaidr came over that afternoon to the Grange to ask Wolf to perform the service for him on the following Sunday.

It was not often that he paid a visit to Mrs. Reece or her son. The reason was not difficult to find. He was old and stout, and his cob was old and stout; they each preferred a quiet half-hour's jog-trot along the shady lanes which begirt the Vale of Llanrhaidr, to the seven miles steep road with which a ride to the Grange made them acquainted.

The rector came upon Judith first in the garden. He was white-haired and venerable in appearance, his manners were kindly, his questions irrepressible, his exclamations excessive.

"Dear me, dear me!" he exclaimed as he shook hands with her. "What a wilderness of a place this has run into! Are they going away? Don't they care for the Grange? I know the old squire didn't keep it up as it ought to have

been kept up. Great pity! Pretty place! Might be made very comfortable. I know, too, the old man left all the money he could away from the family, but still he couldn't leave it all to the infirmary. A very good income goes with the estate. It's a great pity to let a place go to rack and ruin in this way."

To Judith's immense relief Wolf appeared upon the scene at this moment, and she was able to make her escape from further questioning.

"Who says I let the place go to rack and ruin?" he asked in an angry tone as he shook hands with the rector; "I beg you to observe there is neither rack nor ruin anywhere. I do not keep a gardener—that is all. But one gardener would be of no possible use, it would require five at least to keep these grounds even neat, and, as I do not choose to go to that expense, I let the garden alone. It is the same in the house; it would require some extra ten servants to make the house

look smart and trim. I do not choose to go to that expense, so I let the house alone. I beg you to observe that all you are pleased to call rack and ruin is a lack of purely superficial renovation—purely superficial, I repeat. The dilapidation is entirely on the surface.”

The rector looked and felt “sat upon.” The long-windedness of the explanation amazed him. He hastened to agree with Wolf that the repairs needed were “purely superficial” ones, and then he dashed into his request, “Would Mr. Reece undertake the service for him next Sunday? An old friend in a distant part of the country had sent him an invitation he much wished to accept.”

Wolf frowned, and shook his head.

“My Welsh would not be up to the mark,” he said.

“It’s the English Sunday,” answered the rector, “and even if it were not, you might make it so for once. I assure you all the people about Llanrhaidr under-

stand English perfectly, even if they cannot speak it."

Again Wolf shook his head.

"I could not possibly undertake it," he said curtly.

"It would be a real kindness," pleaded the rector; "and," he added kindly, "you would in this way introduce yourself to your neighbours on the other side of Llanrhaiadr. I assure you they have been talking a good deal about you. You know there are the Howells and the Madoxes, Lord and Lady Ruthlyn, and some half-dozen others."

"I have not the slightest wish to make the acquaintance of the Howells or the Madoxes, or Lord and Lady Ruthlyn, or some half-dozen others."

The rector stared at him blankly for a moment; then he recovered his powers of speech.

"As a purely personal favour I ask it, my young friend," he said gently.

"I regret I must refuse it," answered

Wolf coldly ; and to this resolution he adhered, and the good rector went away convinced in his own mind that the new master of Plas-y-Coed was not only one of the worst-mannered men he had ever met, but a most eccentric individual into the bargain.



CHAPTER XVII.

NO tennis-ground; a piano so hopelessly out of tune that no one with an ear for music would essay a chord on it; no saddle-horses, no river, and, direst calamity of all, neither visiting nor visitable neighbours, and the difficulty of entertaining two somewhat buoyant young ladies in a lonely country-house in the blithest time of year may be imagined.

Each day's programme was of necessity as unalterable as the course of the sun itself. There was the inevitable early breakfast, and the inevitable morning walk afterwards; the one o'clock luncheon, the three o'clock drive, the six o'clock

dinner, coffee in some arbour or bowery corner of the garden, prayers at nine o'clock, and all in bed by ten.

And on this meagre diet two young ladies accustomed to the movement and excitement of a lively suburban coterie—the outside ring of the London vortex, as it were—were expected to thrive and be content.

Leila's yawns at night-time were so frequent and prolonged as to threaten dislocation of the jaw.

"It's all very well for you, Theo," she grumbled, "who like to tear about the country, climbing five-barred gates, and doing all sorts of wonderful things—showing your ankles, which, by the way, might be made to look a little more respectable—such boots the other day! But for me—— Oh!—ah-h-h!" And here the muscles of her pretty mouth relaxed into a genuine, unaffected yawn of which few would have supposed Leila, the refined, the poetic, capable.

"It's better than Sophonisba!" said Theo with a grin.

Now, Sophonisba was Dr. Martin's elderly spinster sister, so-called by the schoolboy wits of The Retreat from the fact of her avowed admiration for the genius of the poet Thomson. It may be remarked in passing that the said admiration was duly exhibited by her selecting on every Sunday afternoon "The Seasons" to fall asleep over on the drawing-room couch.

"Yes, it's better than Sophonisba," acquiesced Leila, "or else we shouldn't be here; but a great deal worse than a great many other things we might have done. Think how delightful a fortnight at Scarborough would have been just now!"

Theo gave a long whistle.

"And who would pay the piper, I should like to know?" she asked. "You see, pa only said 'Yes' to our coming here because there was nothing but our railway-fares to come out of his pocket."

"Theo, you get more and more vulgar every day you live," interrupted Leila sharply. "What you'll be in another year I don't know!"

"Ah, nobody knows what they'll be in another year. Dust and ashes, it might be," answered Theo, thinking only of emphasis, and regardless of grammar. "But I know what I'd like to be"—this with a malicious upward look into Leila's face—"and that's as near like Judith Wynne as possible. She's about the only girl in my life I've never wanted to have a shindy with. One might be in the same house with her from year's end to year's end, and never have a squabble."

"I don't admire your taste, and I think it's a question whether Judith Wynne would take your admiration for a compliment," said Leila, a decided sneer disfiguring her chiselled mouth. "But I do think that, without following your model too slavishly, you would certainly

improve your own style if you would copy a little of her silence and reserve of manner. Not that I believe in it altogether. Your quiet, reserved girls are generally the sly, clever manœuvrers. I've no doubt in my own mind that Mdlle. Parolles has a lover of her own, left behind in France—see what huge packets of letters she gets—and that's why she's so contented in this humdrum old house."

Now the nickname "Mdlle. Parolles," be it noted, was not an original conception of Miss Leila's, but was imitated from one she had heard applied to a silent fellow-student by the schoolboy scamps at The Retreat.

Leila did not understand the Shaksperian allusion—shoemakers' wives and daughters are proverbially the worst shod. Of English literature she and Theo knew next to nothing, their intellects having been nourished upon modern novels of various shades of weakness and frivolity.

Theo flashed into indignation at the charges brought against Judith.

"She sly! Why, she's as open as the day itself. The foreign letters all come from her old uncle in France. She told me so, and if she doesn't speak the truth—well, I never met anybody who did, that's all."

"Oh!—ah-h!" yawned Leila again. "I see no necessity for prolonging the discussion. Good night."

And at this very moment Judith, in her own room at the other side of the house, was seated at her open window, with a packet of the aforesaid foreign letters on her knee. They were not all from Uncle Pierre this time. One was from Manon, the house-servant at Villa Rosa, thanking mademoiselle for the little parcel of English stuffs and ribbons she had duly received. Another was from the old gardener, sending his grateful thanks for mademoiselle's kind present of English stockings. A third was from a little village girl whom

Judith had taught to read and write, telling "Mademoiselle Judeethe" that she could never forget her goodness, and that night and day she besought "*Le bon Dieu de lui accorder sa douce bénédiction.*"

The fourth was from Uncle Pierre. This Judith kept till the last to read. It was brief, and almost apostolic in its fervour. The English in parts was quaint and individual.

"I to you send, dear child," he wrote, "the first flowers that have flourished on Aunt Maggie's grave — mignonette and amaranth. Let them take to you from me, from her, a message of sweetness and peace. Never forget how we prayed for you that God Himself would keep you when you lay down and slept, when you rose up and went your way. Dear child, always remember, in darkness and light, in sorrow and in joy, good angels are about your path, to keep your feet from slipping, to guard

your head with their outstretched wings.—
Adieu, chérie.

“Your father in heart,

“OLD UNCLE PIERRE.”

Judith with her tears watered the half-faded flowers. Her letter lay upon her knee: she clasped her hands across her eyes, and leaning back in her chair, wandered in spirit to Villa Rosa once more.

Phantom after phantom, with solemn, silent feet, trooped past, came back again, and vanished once more. The servants of the neat, trim household, the quaint, old-world villagers, a weird army headed always by dear Aunt Maggie, tall, stately, in her dark satins and lace, and dear Uncle Pierre in his priest's dress, white-haired, with stooping shoulders, and eyes as blue as the forget-me-nots which grew among the rushes on the river's bank.

Ah me! what sweet, blessed days those were! Rich in love, full of peace and every simple pleasure! Why did they

ever come to an end? Why had they not been allowed to go on till duty had ended them, and she had been called by her father to fill another niche in life? Why had she not been allowed to stay and comfort dear Uncle Pierre in his loneliness and sorrow? That would have been a work worth doing. Why had she been thrust here among strangers with whom she could have no common bond, where no useful, no definite work of any sort or kind could be given her save that of patient endurance of the dreary months and weeks as they crept by?

Surely, if her father could personally have taken a bird's-eye view of these two households which in turn were her home, he could not by any possibility have wished her to exchange one for the other. There, all had been peacefulness, love, and calm enjoyment; here everything seemed disjointed, troubled and misruled. The very air seemed full of mystery; distrust and suspicion seemed on every side. Do

what she would, she could not divest herself of a sense of coming evil—of some hidden terror hanging over the heads of the household.

She would not let herself dwell on a certain dull pain in the depths of her heart which of late had made itself felt, but, all the same, she knew it was there, and it doubtless added its quota to her sense of loneliness and desolation.

While she had been sitting thus reading her letters and dreaming over her past and present, time had slipped on; the moon had sunk behind the mountains; the midnight sky showed black, starless, forlorn. A chill breeze swept into the room; the old yews beneath her window tossed their ancient, creaking arms; a nightbird flew past with a plaintive cry.

It was all very desolate and forlorn. The old Grange was dreary enough in full noonday sunlight, but here, with this midnight blackness falling over it like a pall, it seemed gruesome and eerie to the last

degree. Her very room seemed full of ghost-like shadows ; her one candle only sufficed to throw a feeble ring of light around the small table on which it stood, and as she looked hither and thither up and down the big and scantily-furnished room, from every corner she could conjure grim phantoms of goblin shapes.

“Dear child, always remember, in darkness and in light, good angels are about your path to guard your head with their outstretched wings !”

The words seemed spoken right into Judith’s ear, as with distinct human utterance.

It was as though some strong, authoritative voice had said, “Down !” to the evil fancies and phantoms, as one would speak to a turbulent, troublesome dog.

Eeriness, gruesomeness, and dark corners all vanished together, and in their stead came a sense of peace, of safety, of quiet confidence.

She closed her eyes, leaned back in her

chair in the darkness. Even the chill night breeze, which swept in at the opened window across her face, seemed to her like the cold wings of the blessed angels themselves fanning her to sleep.



CHAPTER XVIII.

DID she really fall asleep, and if so, how many minutes had she sat there unconscious, before there seemed to sound a voice in her ear saying piteously, passionately :

“ Help me—help me ! ”

Judith passed her hand over her forehead. Whence did the voice come? What did it mean? Her room was in total darkness now, for the candle had burned itself out, and not the faintest grey of dawn had as yet lightened the ink-black of the night sky. A soft, cold wind still came in at the open window, a shadowy bat flitted past.

Judith leaned out, peering down into

the damp, vault-like darkness of the garden below. Had the voice come from there? Was there some living, suffering soul down there sending up a petition for help? She held her breath and listened.

There came up to her the creaking of the old yew-boughs, the slow, low rush of the breeze, the faraway sound of falling water in the woods. Nothing more.

She closed her window. Could it have been her fancy after all: or had the voice called from within the house? She looked all round her. The big ancient furniture of her room loomed gaunt and drear out of the darkness. The corners filled, emptied themselves of, and re-filled with shadows.

“Help me, help me!” sounded the voice, piteously and imploringly as before.

It was as the voice of some troubled dreamer, who thinks he is shouting with his utmost strength, but whose cry is in reality little above that of a wailing child; and it was the voice of Wolf Reece.

Judith felt her blood grow chill, and her limbs tremble beneath her. But she would not wait for another appeal. Along the darkness, groping her way, she went, dreading she knew not what.

Her room was at the end of a long narrow corridor, which, interrupted and crossed by small passages, ran round the house, and into which all the bedrooms on that floor opened.

Mrs. Reece's room and that of the Martin girls were at the other end of this corridor, Oscar's on the floor above. Right and left of her were two unoccupied rooms; immediately facing her door was a narrow passage which led to the servants' quarters, and a little to the right of this was a short flight of five stairs which led up to the tapestry room, now occupied by Wolf.

Along this corridor, as Judith opened her door, the darkness seemed to lie in thick folds, which a feeble stream of light straggling down the small

flight of five stairs tried in vain to pierce.

Judith, straining her eyes, could barely trace the outline of a man's figure on the topmost stair. She could just see that he leaned against the wall with his head on his arm face downwards; but she knew in a moment that those broad shoulders, that bowed head, were Wolf Reece's. None other.

"Help me!" he moaned again piteously, prayerfully. "God send help to me of some sort!" And Judith crossed the corridor, came and stood by his side, and touched his arm.

He raised his head slowly, and looked at her for a moment, without the slightest gleam of recognition. His face was white and haggard, his forehead was knotted into a heavy frown, one large vein protruding like a massive cord.

"I have come to help you if I can," said Judith softly, wondering whether her voice would recall his scattered senses.

He clutched at her arm.

"You—you!" he cried, surveying her with lack-lustre eyes.

Then, right and left, up and down, and around, his gaze wandered, as though seeking in the darkness for something he knew was there, yet could not see.

Judith followed his gaze.

"What is it?" she asked, determined, if possible, to search out this matter to the depths.

His hand, still on her arm, grew tremulous.

"Do you see anyone—anything?" he asked in a hoarse scared whisper.

Judith shook her head.

"One cannot see even the darkness," she answered, trying purposely to assume a careless matter-of-fact tone; "but if you will lend me your candle I will go along the corridor and see if anyone is there."

He scarcely seemed to hear her.

"It went that way—that way," he muttered.

Then he passed his hand across his eyes as though to shut out some dread sight, and Judith could see that he trembled from head to foot as one might who had suddenly been confronted with an embodiment of the terrors of the grave stripped of its conventionalities and comelinesses.

It was terrible to Judith to see this strong man so palsied and shaken.

"What is it?" she asked; "tell me. I may be able to see what you have seen if you will describe it to me."

"I pray God no!" the words seemed to come from the very bottom of his heart, strong and clear. Then he went on passionately: "Child, child, why do you trouble about me? Why do you not leave me to my fate? Why do you torture yourself with the sight of a misery you cannot help? Let me alone, and forget what you have seen to-night."

"I cannot do that. I would rather stay here and help you if possible."

Wolf looked at her with a sad, puzzled expression.

"Why should you wish to help me—why—why?" he asked.

"Because I see you are ill and suffering, and my heart aches for you."

It was said in low quiet tones, but their depth of meaning, was unmistakable

"Child, child, have you no fear, no terror? What if it were given to you to see the thing that I saw a moment ago? Could you look upon it and live?" he asked.

"I have no fear, no terror, of the sort you mean; and if you tell me what you have seen, I would tell you whether I could bear the sight of it," answered Judith, strong in her recovered faith in her angel guardians.

Wolf looked at her fixedly for a moment or two.

"I know I may trust you," he said in low tones, as though he were communing with his own thoughts. "This is the

second time you have stood by me in a moment of torture." He broke off, and then resumed in a more ordinary voice: "Tell me, Judith. Your conscience is pure, and young, and clear; but supposing it grew suddenly clouded: supposing in one miserable, fatal moment, you did a deed impossible to undo—mind, I say impossible to undo—a thing which, if told, would bring ignominy, disgrace, and absolute beggary on you and yours. What would you do?— what would be your refuge? Suicide or prayer?"

The last three words were spoken in a tone more than half cynical, altogether despairing.

"Prayer," answered Judith promptly. "I should tell it to God before I told it to living soul. But," she added suddenly, looking up in his face with those calm, ruth-speaking eyes of hers, "I should make very sure that it could not by any possibility be undone. I would die in my efforts to make amends for my sin."

Wolf stamped his foot passionately.

“Child, I said could not be undone. Do you not understand?” he cried vehemently. “There are things in life that cannot be undone—are there not?”

“Yes, many. In that case I would pray that I might be shown how I could atone for my sin, though it might cost me my life.”

“And supposing your atonement would bring pain, and infamy, and beggary on those you loved best—what then?” asked Wolf in a voice that seemed to jangle and vibrate with the restraint he put on it.

Judith’s eyes drooped. For a moment she made no reply. Wolf went on:

“You loved your Aunt Maggie, your Uncle Pierre, deeply, truly—was it not so? Very well, then. Supposing you knew your atonement would bring down chastisement on their heads, and send them broken-hearted to their graves—what then?”

Judith’s eyes filled with passionate tears.

“Oh, why are things so?” she cried vehemently. “Why cannot we each one suffer alone for the deeds that we do? Oh, I would pray night and day that I might be shown a way of repentance, a way by which I alone might suffer for the deed I had done, and they might go free!”

Out of Wolf's face faded the shadow of a gleam of hope which a moment ago had shone there. He grew white, haggard, stern.

“And supposing you did this?” he asked. “Supposing you knelt and prayed night and day, night and day; supposing you grew strong and bold in your prayers and craved a sign, a message, and there came——” Here he broke off abruptly, laid his hand upon her wrist. “Come here,” he said, and led her up the small flight of stairs to the door of his room.

Evil and weird enough it looked in the light of the one candle that burned upon the toilet-table. The tapestry hung

grim and grey upon the walls, seraph's heads and giant's hands alike obliterated in the heavy shadows cast by the massive, ancient furniture. Out of their midst, gaunt and drear, loomed the sarcophagus-like bed on which the old squire had died.

Wolf stood beside her at the door, pointing to it.

"Supposing," he went on, "you knelt there praying instead of sleeping, not one night but night after night—praying for a message, a sign, and for all answer there came to you"—here his voice sank to a hoarse whisper—"an awful shape, near, nearer, till you felt its coldness touching your cheek, your hand; supposing when it stood close to you—close, mind, I say—you saw that its hands were red with blood: supposing when you looked up into its face you saw that it was your own! Ah, God!" he broke off with a groan, "it is there again. Help me! help me!" he cried in the

same piteous, passionate tones Judith had heard before. "Oh, it comes nearer! Now it stands before the light, and shuts it out! Ah, Heaven have mercy!" His face grew livid with terror, his eyes were wild and fixed, his strong frame quivered.

Judith, straining her eyes into the shadows of the room, could see nothing. She took his hand gently:

"Come away from this room," she said. "It is full of dreary shadows. Come out into the fresh air. See, day is beginning to break;" and she pointed to the grey shreds of light beginning to creep through the farthest window. "You will lose your senses if you stay here."

He let her lead him like a little child down the stairs and along the corridor, walking dumbly, unresistingly, as one might under the influence of some heavy drug.

Something dark just within the narrow passage leading off the corridor to the

servants' quarters caught Judith's eye as she passed along. It was only a pair of strong, large country shoes—nothing more.

Down the large staircase she led him, thence across the first and second halls out on to the stretch of lawn that fronted the house. The air blew fresh and chill. Here and there the night sky was rent asunder, and the grey of dawn as from a prison-house was finding its way in threads and narrow streaks. The mountains were beginning to show their giant forms and fantastic crags from out the mists, the wood to loom forth in its dun greenness.

Judith felt as one might feel, escaped from a cavernous vault or dismal dungeon. Out here she could breathe and think once more.

Wolf drew a long breath, and passed his hand over his ashen face.

"Thank you," was all he said—all indeed he seemed capable of saying. Even out there in the fresh air he staggered,

and would have fallen had it not been for the trunk of a tree at hand.

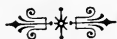
Judith brought him one of the garden-chairs. He sank into it without a word.

“Shall I fetch you water or wine?” she asked.

“No, thank you; leave me now. I shall soon be all right again. By breakfast-time I shall be quite myself,” he answered with a feeble attempt at a smile.

Judith went back to the house, and straight up to her own room, disturbed and tremulous.

As she passed the narrow passage leading off the corridor she looked in vain for the pair of large country shoes. They had disappeared.



CHAPTER XIX.

JUDITH felt how white and haggard she must have looked that morning at breakfast, when she saw Leila's dark, brilliant eyes fixed upon her. Theo openly expressed her opinion of her personal appearance.

"Why, you look as if you had been seeing ghosts all night, Judith," she exclaimed, making a random shot that went very near to hitting the mark.

"Ah, tell us what it was like," cried Oscar, looking up from his plate; "we only want a ghost to make our house the most respectably dismal one in all Wales."

Wolf did not make his appearance at

breakfast. Judith was late in coming down that morning, and the information came to her through Mrs. Reece that Wolf had been down, read prayers as usual, and had had coffee taken to him in his study, as he had many letters to read and to write.

Leila was a little silent and absent, her head was turned often towards the door, with a half-puzzled, half-expectant look in her eyes. It was the last morning the sisters were to spend at the Grange. To her it seemed a monstrous and incomprehensible thing that an avowed and devoted admirer should not make the most of, get all the honey he could out of, the last few golden half-hours she had to bestow on him.

Oscar was to escort the young ladies to London, where they were to spend a night or two with some near relatives. He, poor lad, had not been included in this invitation, and was making wry faces at the thought of the three or four meals

he would have to eat alone with the delectable maiden-aunt, before Dr. Martin's return would enable the whole party to start on their Swiss tour.

"I'm sure she'll kiss you," said Theo consolingly. "Aunt Sophonisba always gets sugary over young men when there is only one left behind. She hates them in the lump—she adores them in morsels."

"Aunt Sophonisba! What an unusual name," murmured Mrs. Reece.

"Why are you not more exact in the terms you use, Theo? You should say she hates them in the abstract, and adores them in the concrete," said Oscar correctly.

"Bother abstract and concrete!" replied Theo. "Pass my cup for some more coffee;" and so on and so on, until the meal, which seemed to Judith the longest she had ever sat through, came to an end.

As they rose from the table, Oscar pulled at her sleeve, and got her into a corner.

"Is Wolf going to drive us to the station, do you know?" he asked, with something like a gleam of hope in his face.

Judith shook her head.

"How can I know? Why don't you send up and ask?" she answered point-blank.

"Oh, it was only this—I thought if by any chance Wolf did not mean to drive us, you might come, don't you see, and—and take Theo off my hands."

"Ah, Oscar," cried Judith with a sudden impulse, "why haven't you set your mind on Theo instead of on that other? She has three times more heart."

"Hush-sh! that's sacrilege," said Oscar gravely.

Then he sent up a message to Wolf, was he going to drive them to the station that morning or not?

The answer came back brief enough, and barely polite. He had so much to get through; Oscar must drive himself and the ladies, and send back the horses by Davies.

“Now, you’ll come, Judith, won’t you?” cried Oscar. “Farmer Jones will take down the luggage for us in his cart, and Davies can go with him. It will do those fat greys a world of good to have an extra hundred pounds to carry. Come along, get ready.”

And Judith was weak enough to consent thus to facilitate a farewell *tete-à-tete* between Oscar and the lady of his heart, all the time with the feeling strong in her own that it would have been far wiser and kinder, had it been possible, to have built up barriers and mountains between these two, than have thus lessened by so much as half an inch their distance one from the other.

“You will have so many *tete-à-tetes* on your Swiss tour,” she grumbled, making one final feeble objection.

“You forget Sophonisba is going,” replied Oscar with a look that spoke volumes. “Come along, there’s a good girl.”

After all, the brisk drive along the country lanes did Judith good, and sent her back stronger in heart to face the mysteries of Plas-y-Coed.

Theo was full of joyous fun, and accomplished with ease seven miles of incessant chatter. Oscar, seated beside Leila on the box, looked radiant as old Sol himself at thus having secured an hour of his goddess's undivided attention; the said goddess, so it seemed to Judith, taking ample revenge for Wolf's cold hand-shaking and curt farewell, by showering extra smiles and sweetness on the poor befooled boy. Her words were very "soft, gentle, and low," none heard them but he, and her eyes spoke sideways to him under her long lashes.

Possibly Theo noticed the alternate looks of indignation and pain that went sweeping over Judith's face, for she gave her a violent nudge with her elbow and said in a loud whisper:

"Now, don't put yourself out about it,

it's her way with them all. Bless you, he'll be sure to find her out sooner or later, and have a row with her, and tell her to go and make eyes at someone else. They all do, one after the other, sure as possible!"

It was poor comfort, but there was none other to be had. Judith could only hope the "finding out" would be "sooner," not later, and that Oscar would take his discovery as calmly as the other young men of Dr. Martin's establishment had taken theirs, if Theo's statements were to be credited.

Yet she could have cried over him as he waved a bright good-bye to her from the window of the train. His heart was made of too good and true stuff, so it seemed to her, to be played tennis with, let the hand that held the racket be never so fair and shapely.

"I shall write to you every other day," screamed Theo, as the train moved off, "and you'll come and stay with us,

won't you, and show me how to scratch up my hair at the back and pile it up on top of my head in the way you do?"

"You little stupid," said Leila to her, *sotto voce*, as she honoured Judith with a formal bow of farewell. "Why, of course she mounts her hair up that fashion to get five or six inches more height! you are gawky enough already, Heaven knows!"

Judith had a long letter from her father to read on her way back. The Indian mail had come in that morning, and she had slipped her letter into her pocket till she could secure a quiet five minutes in which to read it. It was full of kindly solicitude for her comfort, not untinged with a certain amount of anxiety lest by any chance he had made a mistake in his selection of her home. Someone had been throwing out hints to him that it was whispered that the establishment at Plas-y-Coed was conducted on rigidly economic principles; that, in fact, it was

scarcely the kind of home in which a young lady could expect to have her whims and wishes gratified.

"Now, my dear," wrote the father, "I ask you to deal candidly with me, and if things are with you other than you have a right to expect, tell me, and I will make different arrangements for you. Of course you know it is my wish to have myself the pleasure of introducing you to society, so I will ask you not to ground any objections you may have to your present home on its solitariness or quietude. At the same time understand that I wish you to have every luxury and comfort that money can command. A horse, if the Reeces can't give you a mount, a piano, if theirs does not suit you, and whatever else you may require in the way of maids, or jewellery, or dresses. I have placed another thousand pounds to your account at my banker's, and as you want money, all you will have to do will be to apply, as before,

to my London agent and lawyer; but understand, once for all, that I wish you to want for nothing. In about a year and a half's time from now I shall hope to have sufficiently arranged matters to be on my way home to England, and shall look forward to the happiest of old ages in surrounding my darling child with the comforts and pleasures she has a right to demand at my hands."

It was a tender loving letter enough. Judith read it through with a thrill of gratitude, yet with something of a sigh for the distance, the want of sympathy, the strangeness, so to speak, which she felt existed between her father and herself. For a hundred times a day that her thoughts flew to Uncle Pierre, they flew but once to him. As she read the loving words there was no tremulous longing for the touch of the loving hand that had penned them, no terrible, half-silenced dread lest death or disaster might step in between them, and the year and

a half fail of its promise. All this, no doubt, was but the natural, inevitable result of their long years of separation, but it was none the less grievous to her, and at that particular moment seemed specially to accentuate the sense of loneliness and heart-emptiness of which she was conscious.

“If he really wished me to be happy, why did he not let me stay with dear Uncle Pierre?” she thought, as she folded and put her letter in her pocket.

Then, somehow, she began instinctively to read between its lines, and made the discovery that it was rather in his own way than in hers that he would have her to be happy. This, possibly, in the years to come, she would have to find out.

It was not a pleasant notion to get into her head. The drive was a long one, but she had food for thought down every shady lane, along every rocky road-way.

She did not get back to the Grange till nearly four o'clock in the afternoon. Mrs. Reece was feeling the heat, and had gone to lie down in her own room—so Bryce informed her—but luncheon had been laid for her in the dining-room, if she would please to walk in.

Now, luncheon alone in that big, dark room had not a very tempting sound to Judith's ear.

"No, thank you," she said; "I would rather have some tea in my own room, if you'll send it up."

Bryce began to grumble.

"In my young days," she muttered, "gentlefolks weren't half so fond of tea as they are now. They didn't say 'no' to good food when it was set before them. But things have changed since then."

Judith turned upon her brightly enough.

"Why, of course they have changed! Everything is different even since I was

a girl, so how you can expect forty or fifty years to make no difference I can't imagine. Now, please don't talk Welsh at me, but get me my tea as quickly as you can."

As Bryce went away to order the tea, Judith could not help giving a glance at the old body's shoes. They were large country ones, it is true, but there was nothing in them to specially identify them with the pair she had seen in the narrow passage over-night.

As she went along the hall, Wolf came out of his study to meet her.

"I have been listening for you," he said, coming forward and taking her hand. "Are you very tired? Come into the dining-room and have something to eat."

It was a more genial greeting than he had ever before accorded her. Also there was a look in his eyes as he took her hand which, although she might have found difficult to translate into words, set her thrilling and flushing.

Yet she answered formally enough :

“No, thank you ; I am tired, and am going to my own room.”

He did not move on one side to let her pass.

“When you have rested, will you come downstairs—into the garden perhaps? I am wishing so much to have a little talk with you.”

It was said diffidently—shyly almost ; certainly not in the imperious fashion in which he usually commanded a favour.

But Judith grew colder and colder in manner.

“It must not be to-day,” she said with decision. “I have letters to write to save the mail.”

“Is the mail in?” he asked eagerly. “Did you get your Indian letters to-day?”

Judith, a little surprised, answered in the affirmative.

He drew what seemed to her a long breath of relief. Then he reiterated his petition for a few minutes’ talk with her.

"You are even too tired to come out for five minutes into the garden now?" he asked.

"I am," was her reply, so unmistakably formal and decisive that Wolf, with a puzzled, pained look on his face, drew back at once, and allowed her in silence to pass up the stairs.

Judith said to herself, over and over again, as she pulled off her dusty cloak and hat, and let down her long hair for a brush, that she was sure she had done right in thus refusing Wolf's request. There was an uncomfortable feeling rankling in her heart, the sense of having twice in the dead of night surprised this man's secrets, taking to a certain extent his confidences by storm, and proffered to him the most unconventional sympathy and assistance. Was he building upon this the notion that he was bound still further to accord his confidences? The idea was intolerable. He might think her cold and stony-hearted if he pleased,

but she would take care he should get that notion out of his head.

As well as another, even more intolerable than that! One which made her flush crimson to the very roots of her hair, and stamp her foot at herself for so much as casting a side-glance at it, the idea that possibly her willing offers of help and sympathy had been attributed to deeper feelings than those of mere kindly charity. No, she wouldn't let that thought creep into her brain. It was intolerable—not to be thought of! She wouldn't, she wouldn't—he shouldn't—he shouldn't—— Well, he should see that she, at any rate, was not such an one as Leila Martin, to be taken up and laid on one side just as the fancy seized him.

Bryce, coming with her tea-pot at that moment, interrupted the current of her thoughts.

“There's one comfort,” said the old body, putting down the cup and saucer with a clatter: “the tapestry-room is

to be locked up again, and the master goes back to his own room to-night. It's ill to trouble the dead in their graves, no good comes of it."

Judith was in no mood for Bryce's gossip just then. She knew a ready method of silencing her.

"Ne me parley plus de cette chambre lugubre," she cried. "Vous m'ennuyez avec votre, 'pas de bon! pas de bon!' Alley, babiller avec les pies, et leur demander quand reviendront les grolles,"

Bryce flung one sharp, furious look at the young girl, put her fingers in her ears, and backed out of the room, firing a volley of Welsh as she went. All down the staircase and along the passages echoed consonants and gutturals, ending finally with the emphatic bang of the door of her *sanctum sanctorum* below.



CHAPTER XX.

AT first it had seemed strange to have the walls of the old Grange echoing to the sound of young voices, now it seemed equally strange to have the young voices banished. Everybody missed Theo's hearty laughter and practical joking, and although Oscar had been, for him, unusually subdued and silent, yet so long as he was in the house Judith never lacked a companion.

True, the absence of Leila's big, cold eyes and unblushing flirtations was a thing to rejoice and be glad over, but on the whole the breakfast-room had a dreary, forlorn look after the three young people had departed, and Judith found her

thoughts more than once wandering back, as of old, to the bright, cheerful morning-room at Villa Rosa, and the pleasant talk that used to "go" so well with the coffee and hot rolls.

Mrs. Reece, with the weight of some four extra decades of years to stoop her shoulders and lower her vision, naturally saw things from another point of view. She had no special need of young people's society, nor special liking for their voices. To say truth, even Oscar, "the child of her old age," as she was occasionally pleased to call him, was a little too much for her at times.

"We're a small party to-day," she said cheerfully, as she took her place at table and adjusted her glasses as though they were of real use to her. "I suppose it's the creeping on of old age makes me think so, but really I am beginning to feel that small parties suit me best. Now these young ladies, no doubt, were everything that young ladies ought to be, but really

it seemed to me that the voice of the younger of the two was uncommonly loud. Now, Judith, you know more of young ladies than I do, don't you think it was uncommonly loud?"

And Judith, the truth-telling, thus appealed to, was compelled to admit that Theo's voice was uncommonly loud.

"Exactly," Mrs. Reece went on with a little air of triumph, as of one who had compelled an unwilling admission; "her voice was loud in speaking, and, worse still, was loud in laughing. Now, to my way of thinking, a loud laugh in a woman is about the worst thing she can be guilty of—in manners, I mean. She may use her voice in talking, she must use it in coughing, but for laughing she needs only to employ two organs—her eyes and her mouth; her voice should be silent. Of course you'll tell me I'm prim and old-fashioned in my notions, I'm prepared for that——"

"Falstaff had a battle this morning

with a shepherd's dog," interrupted Judith, intent on effecting a diversion from Theo and her idiosyncrasies.

"But," the old lady went on, not so much as hearing the interruption, "for all that, I liked her better than her sister. In spite of her noisy boisterous manner, I preferred her to Miss Leila, who—begging your pardon, Wolf—struck me as being a little sly and underhand." ("There," thought the old lady, "I've said it now! He may take it any way he pleases, but it may help to open his eyes.")

"Mother," exclaimed Wolf earnestly, bending across the table towards her, "why should you beg my pardon? How can your criticism of Miss Martin in any way affect me?"

"How—how?" repeated Mrs. Reece not a little astonished. "Why, my dear, you seemed to be taking a very great interest in the young lady, and I did not think it would come to an end the very minute she was out of the house."

"It has come to an end, then, let me assure you, and is never likely to be renewed," said Wolf coldly; and as he spoke, he rose from the table and left the room.

"Well," exclaimed Mrs. Reece, rightly concluding that Judith remained in her place, "I am to live to see strange things, it seems; but if anyone had told me that Wolf would turn out a flirt, I should have said he was just as likely to turn out a monkey. Now, Judith, be honest—do you see anything of the flirt in my eldest son? Anything of the fool, I might say, for the two things nearly always go together?"

Judith, writhing under this cross-examination, was forced to admit that she could see "nothing of the flirt" in Mrs. Reece's eldest son.

"Well, then," insisted the old lady, putting into words the very question that was uppermost in Judith's thoughts at the moment, "how do you account for his

conduct with Leila Martin? Why was he always running after her, walking with her, driving her here, there, everywhere?"

Judith confessed it was out of her power to account for these things.

"Exactly," said Mrs. Reece with the same triumphant air as before; "out of your power and out of mine to account for this and a great many other things that are going on at the present moment. It seems to me, my dear, as though both my sons just now were acting in a most unaccountable manner. There was Oscar as heavy as lead all the time those two girls were in the house. Now we are prepared for a little gloominess in Wolf; it's his way, and he has had a lot to go through, which somehow seems to weigh him down still, though I cannot imagine why he could not do duty at Llanrhaiadr the other day, and let the rector have a holiday; but as I was saying—ah, what was I saying?" Here she paused, trying to get back the thread of her talk, which

had somehow slipped through her fingers. "Oh, I was saying, so many unaccountable things are happening just now. Only think, last night after you had gone upstairs, Wolf suddenly asked me if I didn't think Oscar had better give up the idea of matriculating next year, and make a start in life at once. And this, after all the trouble he has taken in choosing his college, and getting someone to coach him. It's really incomprehensible!"

"Do you think Oscar has spoken to him on the matter?" asked Judith, recollecting Oscar's appeal to her.

"I am certain he has not. Wolf was so relieved when I told him that Oscar wished the same thing, and said at once he would see about getting him a nomination or something or other for some Government billet. It's all very well talking, but it seems to me that neither of my sons just now quite knows what he is doing. Their conduct, to say the least, is remarkable."

Judith hailed with delight the entrance of Bryce at this moment to receive her housekeeping orders for the day, and made her escape from the room.

Outside the door Wolf met her, and laid his hand upon her arm :

"Come out on the terrace for five minutes," he said ; "I have a question to ask you."

There was no getting out of it this time, his hand was firm as his voice ; go she must. The question brought the colour to her cheeks.

"Did you think," he asked when they were well out on the weedy path with no listeners save the whispering laurels and yews, "that I took a special interest in Leila Martin?—tell me."

Now if Judith Wynne had been like most other young ladies, she would have tossed her head, and said with a little frown : "I have never thought at all upon the matter, it was no concern of mine." But not being at all like other

young ladies, and being utterly unskilled in the art of prevarication, she answered simply enough:

“Yes: who could help thinking so?”

Wolf made a sharp movement of annoyance.

“How can I explain? How is it possible for me to make you understand that I was but making an experiment?” he cried.

“An experiment!” repeated Judith, looking at him gravely.

“Aye, an experiment. You are shocked, your eyes tell me that you do not think experiments on girls’ hearts are lawful and right. But what if this girl had no heart, and the experiment was made on mine, not hers?”

He paused, waiting for a reply. Getting none, he went on:

“Will you then think so hardly of me? Will you utterly condemn a poor wretch who, suffering tortures, stretches out his hand to take anything and everything

in the shape of a drug that is offered to him! Nay, more, who goes out of his way, as it were, to test whether this or that thing will act as an opiate and lull his pain? Do you understand—do I make my meaning plain?”

“Yes, I understand perfectly. But why say these things to me?—why attempt any painful explanations?” she asked gently, anxious to make him understand that though she would gladly and heartily help him at any moment in the extremity of his misery, yet in cold blood she could not and would not thrust herself into his confidence.

“Why, why!” he repeated vehemently, and for the moment he lost control over himself; “because I value your opinion more than that of any other living soul; because, from the very first day you set foot in this house, I read your truth and goodness in your face, and knew I could trust you as I could none other; because,” and here his voice sank to a low passion-

ate whisper, "vile as I am, and vile as you must think me, I would not have you lay to my charge sins which I have not committed, though they be such trivial ones as coxcombry and flirtation."

Judith was strangely moved. For the moment she had no words at command.

Wolf went on. "Heaven knows," he said bitterly, "I have no wish to make myself out a saint. That would be a useless task enough after what you have seen with your own eyes."

Judith could have no doubt as to what he alluded. "All that is to me as if it had not been," she said, quietly.

"As if it had not been!" he echoed slowly; "can that be possible? Will you tell me you have driven out of your mind the words I used in the horror that fell on me? Great Heavens! Nothing—no power in this world, nor any other, will ever sear from my brain the awfulness of those nights."

His eyes fixed themselves on distant

space for a moment, then turned right and left of him with a hurried, scared look.

Judith feared lest his fancy might once more conjure up the evil thing that pursued him.

She laid her hand gently on his arm.

"You do not quite understand me," she said: "I meant to say what I saw and heard I should consider sacred, and would not allow myself even in thought to dwell upon. Unless, indeed," she added a little wistfully, "by so doing I could in any way be of service to you."

He turned round upon her, his face alight with gratitude.

"You—you say this?" he exclaimed.

"Yes; why not?" she said, gathering courage now from her own boldness. "I told you the other night how gladly I would help you if I could."

"Child, what you told me the other night I did not hear; my brain was dazed and simply incapable of thought. But I hear you now! Do you mean you would

go out of your way—really out of your way—to help me?”

“Out of my way, of course, gladly. Who would not?”

Wolf shook his head sadly enough.

“Many would not. How could it be expected of them? What have I done for my fellow-men, that any should step out of his way to give me a helping hand?”

“What have you done?” exclaimed Judith; “oh, ever so many things for other people, when you were working in London. Oscar has told me, your mother has told me over and over again, all you used to do for the poor people.”

His face brightened. It was pleasant to him to think that this girl with the clear, shining eyes should have before her fancy a better likeness of him than the one he now presented to her view.

“Yes,” he said, rejoicing inwardly over the Wolf of the past, just as middle-aged people like sometimes to look at their

young photographs, and think "this once was I." "Yes, I did work in those days. It was a hard life, but it was a blessed one——" He broke off abruptly; a mist seemed rising before his eyes; he laid his hand tremulously on the young girl's arm. "Judith," he said, sadly, humbly, "God only knows, but it seems to me if you had been by my side then, I should not have brought down this heavy judgment upon my own head."

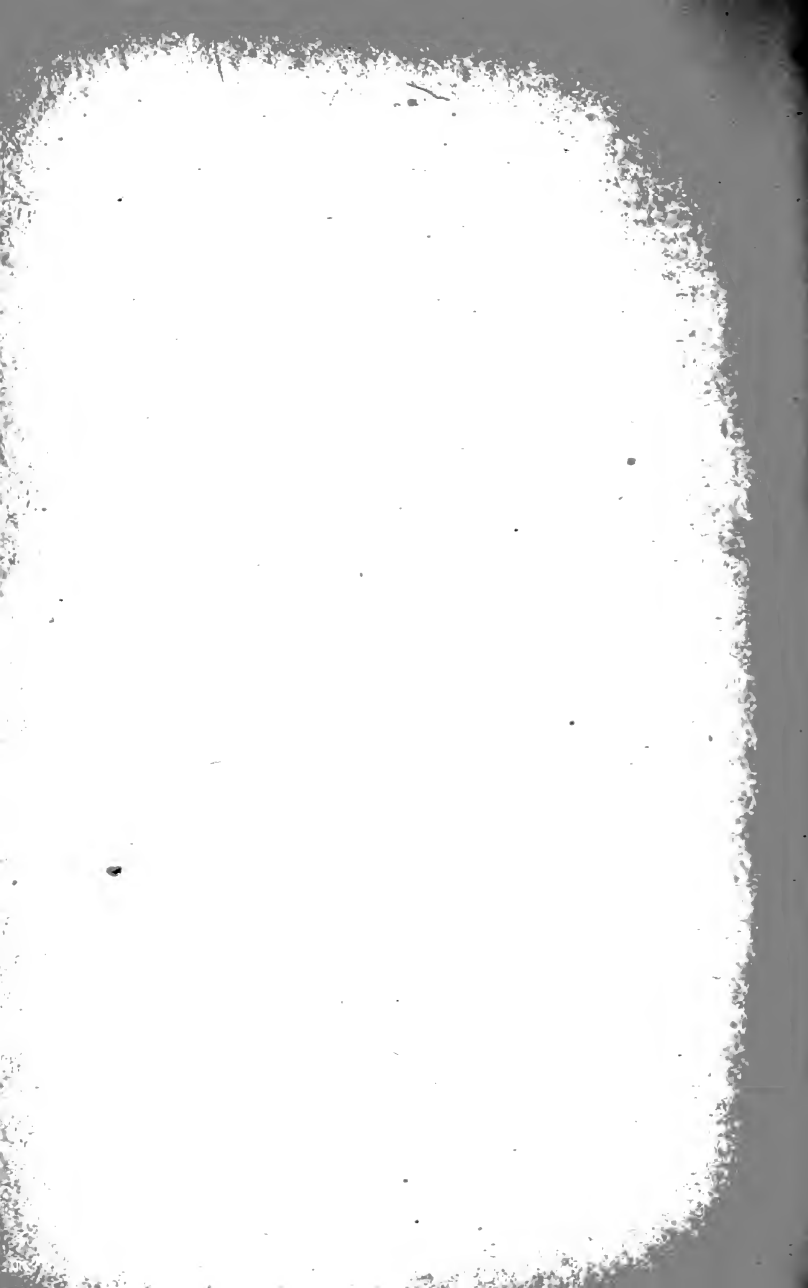
Even as he finished speaking he suddenly turned round and left her.

Judith stood still, looking after him, blankly, wonderingly. For a moment creation seemed to stand still and hold in its breath, the birds' singing ceased, only the roar and tumble of the cataract in the woods come suddenly close under the garden wall seemed to sound in her ears.

For but one brief moment—no more; the next she had bowed her head and gone swiftly into the house.

All in a flash the knowledge had come to her that pity for this man had deepened into a tenderer, stronger feeling, and that henceforth to the end of her life, come storm, come sunshine, come fair weather, or foul, creation held but one man for her, and that man was Wolf Reece.

END OF VOL. I.









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